An Original Comedy Adventure Based On The Hilarious ABC-TV Series•

William Johnston

The Brady Bunch #3

COUNT UP TO BLAST-DOWN!

The wacky Bradys take in a hip rock group along with rich Aunt Zel's precious antiques—and the house teeters toward disaster!

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

MARK

Guests in the House???

Carol and Mike Brady stared aghast as Alma Watts, followed by five boys, returned to their front door.

"These are my babies! Aren't they show-stoppers?"

The Bradys had to agree. The oldest boy was dressed like an Indian brave, the next like Oliver Twist, the others like a tiny Yale student, a fireman, and a World War I airplane pilot.

They were all loaded down with musical instruments.

"Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro and Cinq," chortled Alma, pointing them out, "named for the different countries they were born in. I forgot to tell you, but they're a rock 'n' roll group. And we're all going to stay with you—my babies with your babies!

"Isn't that wonderful?"

Carol and Mike nodded dumbly.

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LANCER EASY EYE EDITIONS

LANCER BOOKS
NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK

COUNT UP TO BLAST-DOWN!

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LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

COUNT UP TO BLAST DOWN

1

"Peace . . . quiet . . . it's wonderful. . . ." Mike Brady said, smiling blissfully around the breakfast table at his family.

Carol, his wife, seated at the opposite end of the table, nodded agreement, smiling back in the same euphoric way. "No carbon monoxide, no cranky drivers, no horn-beepers. . . ." she added.

At Mike's right, the three boys, Greg, Peter and Bobby, looked less pleased, but content nevertheless.

"I guess it's okay," Bobby said. "I kind of wanted to go to the Grand Canyon, though. That's my life's ambition —to throw something in and see how long it takes to get to the bottom."

"You mean that's your whole goal in life?" Marcia asked. She and the other two girls, Jan and Cindy, were

seated directly across from the boys. "Suppose you get to do it by the time you're, say, fifteen? You won't have anything more to live for."

"Why can't I keep doing it over and over again?" Bobby replied. "After I throw one thing in, I can throw something else in. A guy could keep that up forever."

Marcia groaned dramatically.

At that same moment, Alice, the maid, entered, carrying a fresh supply of steaming-hot waffles. She began distributing them. "Still happy with your first day of vacation, now that it's almost an hour old?" she asked Mike. Alice was a somewhat pear-shaped, middle-aged woman with a generally pleasant manner and a smile that could not only warm, but, on occasion, had been known to heal. "Or are you getting restless for the open road?"

"Not me," Mike assured her. "Staying home and leaving the open road to all the lunatics was the second best idea I've ever had. You know, people are so busy living in their house and their neighborhood and their town, that they don't really get to know it and enjoy it. But we're going to be different. We'll devote the whole vacation to becoming thoroughly acquainted with what's around us."

"With our belts?" Cindy asked, puzzled.

Mike laughed. "We have more around us than our belts," he said. "We have people, we have parks, we have —Well, that's the idea. We'll find out what else we have around us."

"Mike . . ." Carol said. "Your 'second best idea,' you called this. What was your first best idea?"

"Marrying a beautiful blond woman with three beauti-

ful blond daughters when I already had three handsome sons," Mike replied.

"I think he wants somebody to tell him he's handsome," Alice commented.

"Calling it your first best idea doesn't even half describe it," Carol said to Mike. "It was the Idea of the Year. And, eventually, it will probably become the idea of the Century. You know . . . somebody ought to put up a statue to it. Whom do you contact about things like that?"

"Well, you could—" Mike began. He was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. "I'll get it," he said to Alice, rising, as she was about to put the plate of waffles down. "It's probably the sculptor, wanting to measure me for the statue."

"Not a statue of you," Carol called after him as he left the breakfast area, "a statue of the idea. . . ."

Reaching the front door, Mike opened it, and, startled, found himself face to face with a short, broad, muscular Japanese man in the uniform of a chauffeur. Looking beyond him, Mike saw a limousine parked in front of the house, and, attached to it, a huge trailer. No longer startled, but now baffled, he fixed his attention on the Japanese man again.

"Is this the Blady house?" the man asked gruffly.

"Blady? Oh! Yes, Blady. I'm Mike Blady . . . uh, Brady, that is. Is there something—"

The chauffeur had turned and was waddling toward the limousine. Fascinated, Mike watched him. Reaching the car, the chauffeur opened the door, then stepped back. A short, plump, gray-haired woman appeared from

the opening. Although it was early summer, her shoulders were draped in a mink stole. Seeing Mike, she smiled delightedly and fluttered her fingers at him in greeting, then advanced toward the house. Mike stared at her, perplexed, studying her bulldog-like countenance, then, all at once, recognized her.

"Aunt Zel!" he erupted, grinning.

"Michael! You darling boy! You didn't know me, did you?" Having reached him, she took his hand and patted it affectionately, then looked him up and down. "Oh, my! Still as good-looking. How long has it been? Ten years. No wonder you didn't recognize me. I didn't have Ohoho the last time you saw me."

"Have you been ill?" Mike asked. "You look fine."

"Ill? Of course not. That is, nothing other than the usual. Why do you ask?"

"You said something about having Ohoho."

Aunt Zel hooted. "Oh, my!" she giggled. She pointed behind her. "Ohoho is my chauffeur," she explained. She lowered her voice. "He's Japanese. He used to be a champion wrestler. Marvelous protection for me." She peered past Mike. "Well . . . what a charming home."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry," Mike said, stepping back to let her pass. "Uh—" He nodded toward the chauffeur, who was still near the limousine. ". . . what about Hohoho?"

"Not *Hohoho*, dear. *Ohoho*," Aunt Zel said. "It's not three *hos*, it's two *hos* with an '*o*' in front of it. But don't worry. He'll be busy for a while, getting my babies ready to be moved. They need the tenderest care, you know."

"Yes, babies are—Babies?"

"My antiques," Aunt Zel smiled. "I think of them as my babies. Since I never married, I never had children. So, my antiques take the place of little ones; they go everywhere with me. The trailer," she said, moving into the living room, "is full of them."

Mike followed her. "It's wonderful seeing you again," he said. "Are you just passing—Hey! I forgot—the family. Just a minute," he said, heading toward the kitchen, "I'll get them."

"Yes, your marvelous family," Aunt Zel called after him, seating herself on the couch. "I was sorry I couldn't get to the wedding, but I'd already promised myself to Prince Harold. That's the Barbizon Harold, of course. If you'll take a bit of advice from an old woman, dear, next time you won't plan your ceremony for the same day that a member of a royal family is marrying. The conflicts—" She noticed that Mike was no longer in the room.

He returned a few minutes later, trailed by the bunch. Proudly, he introduced Carol and Alice, then the girls, Marcia, Jan and Cindy, and the boys, Greg, Peter and Bobby, and finally, the dog, Tiger.

"He doesn't bound about, does he?" Aunt Zel asked.

"Which one?" Mike asked, looking at the boys.

"That one," she replied, indicating the dog.

"Oh. Well, only when he's in a particularly good mood or at feeding time or . . . as a matter of fact, he does bound about a bit. Why?"

"My babies. They're quite fragile, most of them," Aunt Zel replied.

"Oh, well, he won't go into the trailer."

"I don't believe you understand, dear," Aunt Zel said.

"Ohoho will be moving the antiques in here soon. I wouldn't dream of leaving them in the trailer. They're simply too dear to me. Now then," she smiled, looking from Mike to Carol, to the girls, to the boys, to Alice, "how charming. So this is the Brady bunch! Marvelous. You know, you remind me so much of Prince Rupert's family; the mother and the girls so blond and beautiful, and the prince and the boys so dark and handsome. Poor Prince Rupert."

"Something happened?" Mike asked.

"As you know, he's an automobile salesman in lower Saxony these days," Aunt Zel replied, "and I'm afraid he didn't make his sales quota this year. Although, Heaven knows, I did everything I could to help him. I bought automobiles from him for all the orphans in the home in Liverpool. My pet charity, you know. British orphans, I think, are really the most appealing. They're so neat and clean always and have such darling haircuts. But, be that as it may, Prince Rupert still couldn't make his quota." She sighed. "Selling is simply not in his blood," she said.

"Gee, what'll he do?" Carol asked, concerned.

"There's talk that he'll take in tourists at the family castle," Aunt Zel replied. "Let's not think about it, though; it's much too sad. Let's talk about something happy. You'll be delighted to know, I'm sure, that I intend to be with you for several days . . . possibly even weeks, depending on how the babies adjust to the atmospheric conditions. Your climate, I understand, is warm and slightly moist. When I was planning this visit and mentioned that fact to the prime minister, he pointed out that the climate is not unlike that on the Riviera—during

the season, naturally. I was encouraged. My babies have always fared beautifully on the Riviera."

"During the season," Alice added.

"Naturally." Aunt Zel scanned the family again. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

Mike made vague churning motions with his hands, indicating that, yes, he *was* wondering why Aunt Zel had appeared without warning, considering the fact that he had not seen her or heard from her in over ten years.

"Well, primarily, it's because I'm not a girl anymore," Aunt Zel said.

Cindy looked bewildered. "Are you a boy now, Aunt Zel?" she asked.

Aunt Zel laughed. "No, no, dear. What I mean is, I'm getting on in years. And, I thought it would be a lovely idea to visit all my relatives before . . . well, before it become too late. I'm doing it in a fairly organized way—for a change. When I told the maharajah what I planned to do, you can imagine what he said." She chuckled, greatly amused.

"What did he say?" Carol inquired.

"He said, 'Zel, that's not at all like you.'" Again, she laughed.

"That's a knee-slapper, all right," Carol smiled.

"Ah, yes. Perhaps I'm entering my second childhood. Nevertheless, that's my plan."

"What?" Mike asked. "You didn't explain it."

"Oh? Didn't I? Well, what I intend to do, you see, is make my way across the country, starting here, and visit all of my American relatives, one by one, or, family by family, as practicality dictates. According to my sched-

ule, that will wrap me up in Maine just in time to leave for the continent and get there in time for the opening of the season."

"That's a great idea," Mike said. "When will you be leaving?"

"Mike!" Carol scolded. "You sound as if you're trying to hustle her out!"

He laughed. "I didn't mean it that way, Aunt Zel. I was just going to say that—Well, what I was getting at was—" He was saved by the sound of the doorbell. "I'll get it!" he said, hurrying away.

"You must lead a very exciting life," Carol said to Aunt Zel when Mike had gone. "What do you do most of the time, just sort of . . . well, sort of drift?"

"Oh, yes, dear . . . drift here, drift there . . . from brunch to lunch from tea time to dinner . . . just one exciting experience after another. . . ."

"Was that a *real* prime minister you were talking about?" Greg asked her, awed.

Aunt Zel looked puzzled. "Is there another kind, dear?"

"What did he have to say about the common market?" Greg asked. "I'm studying the common market in Europe in school."

"Oh, the prime minister wouldn't mention anything common to me, darling. He's too much of a gentleman for that." She frowned. "Although . . . there *was* something said about marketing during our talk, as I recall. A complaint about the prices the green grocers were getting, I believe. I imagine it was the prime minister's wife who said it, however, rather than the prime minister."

She turned her attention to Carol. "I hope you have room for me, dear. I could go to a hotel, of course. But I look upon this little adventure as a lark, and I would really prefer roughing it."

"Roughing it?"

"Living without the assistance of servants and a hotel staff."

"Well, I don't know that it will be roughing it," Carol said, a little touchily. "There'll be Alice. . . ."

Mike returned at that moment. He looked somewhat apprehensive. "That was Ohoho," he said. "He's, uh, bringing in the babies. Carol," he went on, "could you help us . . . he wants some things moved off some shelves. I'm not sure . . . uh. . . ."

Aunt Zel made shooing motions, directing them at Carol. "Go right ahead, dear," she said. "After all, babies first, aunts second. I'll stay right here and talk to the children. The young people of today are so marvelous; adore them. All their lovely ideas about overthrowing the Establishment. They'll be surprised, I'm sure, to find out what the prime minister thinks about that."

Carol nodded dimly, then followed Mike from the room. When they got into the foyer, Mike halted and pointed out the open doorway. Carol saw Ohoho approaching the house with an Oriental vase. He was moving with extreme caution, advancing step by step by step.

"He's bringing things like that into *this* house," Mike said, appalled. "Do you know how long it will be in one piece? With the kids here . . . and the dog here . . . and us here?"

"Mike, she must understand that. If it doesn't worry her, why should it worry us?"

"She lives in hotels," Mike replied. "She has never lived in a house with children. She doesn't realize." He waggled a finger at Carol, then led her from the foyer and into the kitchen, where Alice was fitting the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher. "Carol," he said, "I know this is a lot to ask, but I'm going to ask it, anyway. I would appreciate it if you would try to take this whole thing in stride."

"What whole thing?"

"Aunt Zel. And her antiques. And Ohohohohoho. The whole thing."

"Mike, I don't know what's bothering you," Carol said. "Personally, I think Aunt Zel is a doll. And I don't mind having antiques around the house. They'll make me think I'm rich."

"Right," Alice said. "When one of them falls and breaks, we can invite the whole neighborhood in to see it. 'Look—a thousand bucks, scattered all over the floor,' we can say. And it won't hurt a bit. It won't be *our* thousand bucks."

"We'll be careful," Carol said to her. "Nothing will get broken."

"This is just great of you," Mike told her.

"I still don't understand why you think I'd object."

"Some people might think of it as . . . well, toadying, I suppose."

"You're still missing me," Carol informed him.

"You mean you don't know why she's really visiting?" Mike said.

"There's a reason other than what she mentioned?"

"Of course," Mike replied. "Think about it. Remember what she said. She wants to see all of her relatives 'before it's too late.' What she means is, she figures this will be her last time around. As she said herself, she's not a girl anymore. Carol, her purpose is to decide whom to leave her money to."

"Oh," Carol replied matter-of-factly. Then, suddenly looking impressed, she asked, "How rich is she exactly?"

"Fabulously."

"Actually? Really fabulously?"

"There is a rumor in the family that if it were possible to take it with you, there would be no more world left after Aunt Zel passed away."

"That's fabulous," Carol agreed. "Why do you think her visit would bother me, though?"

"You know what people are going to say. They're going to say we're being nice to her only because she's so rich."

Carol shrugged. "Who cares what people say? After Aunt Zel passes away and we inherit the world, we'll send them somewhere else."

"Okay," Mike nodded. "I just wanted to be sure that you don't mind. After all, she just popped in, without any warning."

"I love her. She's cute," Carol said. "I'm sure she won't be any trouble at all. Now, let me go help Ohoho find space for the babies."

"There'll be luggage, too," Alice said. "Where will Aunt Zel sleep?"

Carol, about to leave the kitchen, stopped. She

frowned, thinking. "She can have our room. Mike and I will sleep in the den on the fold-out sofa. Okay?" she said to Mike.

"It suits me if it satisfies you."

"Then that's it," Carol said, departing.

Mike followed her. As they reached the foyer, Ohoho was entering, carrying a single dinner plate, handling it as if he were afraid it might evaporate if he moved too rapidly.

"Oh, that's nice," Carol said, admiring the plate. "Are you going to have to carry the whole set in like that, piece by piece?"

"This is onry prate rike this in existence," Ohoho advised her, warning her by means of his tone not to get any nearer.

"We better make sure it doesn't get anywhere near the dishwasher then," Carol said. "It can be a little rough on fine china. The everyday dishes, it treats with courtesy and respect, but it goes after the fine china with a hammer. What do you think?" she asked Ohoho, indicating the antique plate. "Would you like to stand in a corner and hold it while Aunt Zel is here, or shall we trust it to a shelf?"

"I am too busy to stand," Ohoho replied.

"Then a shelf it is," Carol decided. She led him toward the rear of the house. "There's a sort of whatnot thing in the hall back here," she said. "We'll try it there."

Mike remained in the foyer. When Carol and Ohoho disappeared from view, he began to look apprehensive again. The wary expression remained on his face until they reappeared.

"It went just fine," Carol told him, returning with Ohoho behind her. "The baby is all tucked in—so to speak."

"You know how the boys come in the back way sometimes," Mike said. "Maybe the hall isn't the best place."

"Where else?"

"We could imbed it in concrete and bury it in the basement."

"Then how would Aunt Zel visit it? Ohoho tells me she gets very unhappy if she doesn't have her babies near her where she can see them. Mike, relax. Aunt Zel isn't worried, evidently. She told Ohoho to bring them inside. If she had any fears, she'd leave them out in the trailer."

Mike thought a moment, then agreed. "You're right," he said. "See what I'm doing? I'm letting the situation get to me. What I'm really thinking about is her money. The fact is, I don't care whether she mentions me in her will or not. Who needs it? We get along fine without her fortune. But there is something mesmerizing about the idea of great wealth. It changes people. Just *thinking* about it can turn people inside-out."

"Don't think about it," Carol advised. She turned to Ohoho. "You can bring in another plate," she said. "I have more shelves in the recreation room. They're full of books now, but I can put the books. . . . Well, I'll find a place for them. Bring in the babies."

With Mike's assistance, Carol hustled about the house emptying shelves, creating space for the antiques. Ohoho continued to cart priceless objects in from the trailer. He was still at it when Mike and Carol, having run out of shelves to empty, returned to the living room.

They found all of the children and Tiger grouped around Aunt Zel in a circle, while she told them stories about her life among the rich and famous. The dog was snoring. Three of the children were half-listening; two were becoming droopy-eyed. But Aunt Zel had Greg's full attention and complete interest.

". . . looked very surprised," Aunt Zel was saying. "Then he looked at me and, in all candor, said, 'Actually, the only problem is when I get it caught in the strings of my mandolin.' " She laughed heartily.

Greg's eyes and mouth opened a bit wider. Tiger snorted in his sleep. The other children smiled mechanically.

"There you are," Aunt Zel said, sighting Mike and Carol.

"Who got what caught in his mandolin?" Carol asked curiously.

"Oh, what's-his-name," Aunt Zel replied. "Is Ohoho keeping busy?"

"Trot, trot, trot, back and forth, one plate at a time," Carol replied. "And Mike and I cleared off all the shelves. So, anywhere you look, you'll see one of your babies. Who is what's-his-name?"

"Pardon, dear?"

"The one who gets . . . gets whatever it is caught in the strings of his mandolin."

"Oh, him!" Aunt Zel replied, chuckling again, but, at the same time, dismissing the matter. "You all understand, of course," she went on, addressing the whole family, "that these aren't the run-of-the-mill antiques. Oh, my, no. Each one is unique. And I mean that in the stric-

test sense. They are all one-of-a-kind. They are, in short, irreplaceable. Am I making myself clear?"

"That means that if you lose one you couldn't get another to take its place," Peter said.

"Exactly, my dear. Soooooooo . . . protecting and preserving them calls for more than the ordinary caution. In the hotels where I keep suites, other guests on my floor are cautioned by the management to walk very softly and to stifle any tendencies to cough too vigorously."

Mike scowled. "This isn't a hotel, Aunt Zel," he said.

"Of course not, dear. That's why I know I don't have to worry about my babies while they're here. They take all sorts of people at hotels these days. People who, if they weren't cautioned, I imagine, would not even stop at whistling in the corridors. But this is a home. Strangers, certainly, won't be wandering in and out, will they? And we've all been trained not to walk heavily, whistle, speak at high pitch or—" She looked pointedly at Tiger, who was still snoring. "—or breathe too loudly while in the house, havent we?"

Bobby nudged Tiger, waking him. The dog muttered, rose, then left, looking ill-treated.

"Aunt Zel," Mike said, "I think you ought to realize that this is a house with children in it. Now, children—"

"—are treasures," Aunt Zel broke in. "You don't have to tell me that, Michael. After all, I have my own babies, don't I? And, they're a constant joy to me—just as your children, I'm sure, are a constant joy to you."

"Well, off and on," Carol said. "But, about this fellow with the mandolin . . . I was wondering—"

"Yes, that's a perfect example," Aunt Zel said. "Why,

while I was telling your children that little tale, they sat here as if they had been put under a spell, hardly moving a muscle—as the saying goes. Perfect children—just like my babies."

"I'm going to be frank with you," Mike said. "They're not always like that—fortunately. That's what I'm trying to explain to you. Not that they go tearing through the house like a bunch of wild Indians . . . uh, every minute of the day. But—"

"Michael, you don't have to apologize."

"Apologize for what?"

"The one that breathes so loudly."

"That was the dog, Aunt Zel. I was trying to tell you about the children. They—"

"—are treasures," she said, breaking in again. "And especially this one," she added, patting Greg on the head. "He's been listening with both ears to every word I've said. I *like* that in a child. Why, if it weren't for his age, I wouldn't guess that he was so young. He's more like an adult, the way he listens."

Lowering her voice, Carol said to Greg, "Who was the guy with the mandolin?"

Before he could reply, Aunt Zel, who had overheard Carol's question, said, "Yes, I think he enjoyed that little story in particular. He reacted to it in quite the same way Her Highness did when I told it to her. With aplomb, describes it best, I think. To be absolutely truthful, I'd say that dear Greg reacted to it with even more aplomb than Her Highness. Oh, that's high praise. Her Highness, you know, is famous for her aplomb. I recall the evening when we were all at dinner at the palace and one of the

ladies-in-waiting came in to inform her that her father, the king, had got his foot caught in an ice cream freezer. Well, showing not a bit of emotion at all, she looked the lady-in-waiting straight in the eye and said, 'I thought that old ice cream freezer had been sent off to the junk pile ages ago.' "

"I'll bet there was applause," Carol said.

Aunt Zel turned a bit pale. "In the palace?" she said.

"Sorry . . . I forgot where you were."

"What's an ice cream freezer?" Greg asked.

Aunt Zel looked at him in astonishment. "That's marvelous!" she said. "If Her Highness had only thought of that!"

"Golly, yes," Carol said. "That beats Her Highness hands-down, aplombwise." Then, quickly, to Aunt Zel, she said, "*What* did he get caught in his mandolin strings?"

Aunt Zell chuckled. "What else—considering," she replied. With effort, she pushed herself up from the couch. "A nap would do wonders for me now, I imagine," she said. "As the maharajah always says, 'Forty winks before lunch give a potentate a chance to catch up on the sleep he missed the night before.' " She chuckled. "The maharajah says a great many things like that."

"I guess he's sort of to wit what Her Highness is to aplomb," Carol commented.

"If not more so," Aunt Zel nodded. "Now then, my quarters . . . ?"

"We'll put you in our room," Carol said.

"I'm dispossessing you?"

"Don't worry about it," Mike said. "Carol and I will

muddle through. In a crisis, we're pretty high on aplomb ourselves."

"Very good," Aunt Zel replied.

"I'll show you the way, Aunt Zel," Greg said, jumping up. Then he froze, horror-stricken. "I'm sorry I moved so fast," he said. "I hope the babies are all right."

Aunt Zel patted him fondly on the head once more. "The babies forgive you," she told him. "Now then . . . lead the way."

When Greg and Aunt Zel were gone, the other members of the family devoted several minutes to simply staring at each other, mouths hanging open.

Mike was the first to finally find his voice. "Did you see that?" he said. "That's terrible. He apologized for moving too fast! For disturbing the air! What has she done to my son?"

"Mike . . . let's be fair," Carol said. "She didn't do anything to him. He did it to himself. He let himself get carried away, listening to those stories. But don't worry about it. Greg is one hundred percent boy. By the time he comes back from escorting her upstairs, he'll be back to normal."

Mike sighed, not entirely convinced. "I hope so. I've never seen him so . . . so awestruck, though. You know, he looked at her as if she were Willy Mays. That's the kind of admiration that doesn't fade quickly."

"I don't think you have to worry, Dad," Bobby said. "Greg'll get over it. He's too full of plums to keep that stuff up very long."

"Full of plums?" Carol asked.

"That's what Aunt Zel said."

"Aplomb," Carol told him. "That means . . . well, it means like—"

"Like getting your foot caught in the ice cream freezer," Cindy explained to Bobby.

"No," Carol said, "it's more like . . . like. . . ." She shrugged. "Full of plums sums it up pretty well, I guess."

2

After a while, Ohoho ran out of shelf space for the antiques. He continued to carry them into the house, however, placing them temporarily in the foyer. When he had them all inside, he consulted Mike and Carol about what to do with them.

Mike and Carol stood in the foyer, one at each side of Ohoho, studying the collection of plates, vases, bowls, pitchers, mugs, pots and so on. Clearly, the antiques could not be left where they were, right in the path of anyone entering the house through the front entrance. Yet, as Ohoho had reported, all the shelves were occupied.

"Under things," Carol decided. "Like, under the sofas, under the chairs, and places like that."

"And under the beds," Mike nodded. "That'll take care of the problem, all right."

So, Ohoho began transporting the antiques again, removing them from the foyer, storing them under sofas, chairs and beds.

After he had made a few trips, Mike and Carol started to leave the foyer. But they had gone only a few steps when the doorbell sounded. They halted and looked at the door with apprehension.

"Let's leave well enough alone," Mike said.

"We have to answer it."

"What law says we *have* to answer our own door?"

"Whose door would we answer?" Carol asked.

"You're misinterpreting—"

The doorbell sounded again.

"You do it," Carol said to Mike.

At that moment, Alice arrived from the kitchen. Looking at Mike and Carol curiously, she said, "I thought I heard the doorbell."

"You did," Mike replied. "But after what happened earlier when we answered the doorbell, we're a little hesitant." He shrugged. "All right . . . I'll answer it."

"If it's another Japanese wrestler, tell him we have one," Carol said.

Mike opened the door. Standing on the stoop was an extremely attractive woman. She was about Carol's age and blond and fashionably dressed, and she seemed to be acutely perturbed.

"I found the note," the woman said. "Do you know where I could find my sister?"

Mike stared at her blankly for a moment. Then he said,

"This is the Brady residence. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Well, yes and no," the woman replied. "Actually, I'm looking for my sister. But the note told me to come here." She looked past him at Carol and Alice. "Maybe my sister is inside," she said.

Mike looked back at Carol and Alice. "No, those are the only sisters I have," he replied. "Except for Aunt Zel. But she couldn't be your sister. Because that would make you my aunt. And I'm positive—" He interrupted himself and took in a deep breath and then let it out. "Let's try this," he said. "I'll close the door, then you ring the bell again, and I'll answer it, and we'll start all over. Okay?"

The woman looked annoyed. "This wasn't *my* idea," she said. "All I did was go next door, where my sister lives, and the whole place was locked up, but there was this note—"

Carol suddenly stepped forward. "You must be Gladys Albright's sister!" she said.

The woman brightened. "That's what I been telling this guy," she said, indicating Mike. "But he keeps looking at me like I'm an acrobatic act."

"Acrobatic act?" Mike asked.

"In show business there is a general tendency to look down on the acrobats," she explained. "I'm in show business." She turned her attention back to Carol. "Boy, am I in a bind," she said. "I left this bum of a husband of mine and went home to my sister, but then when I got there, all I found was this note on the door and the whole house locked up saying to To Whom It May Concern to come

over here if they had anything to deliver or anything. Where's Madge?"

"Oh, well, Madge and Harvey went East," Carol replied. "They're probably somewhere in Illinois or Indiana . . . one of those states on the Atlantic ocean."

"For good?" the woman asked, shocked.

"Oh, no. Just for vacation. They'll be back. . . ." She frowned, figuring. "It was two weeks ago. You're in luck," she smiled. "They'll be back tomorrow."

The woman sighed relievedly. "Boy . . . you had me worried." She smiled sheepishly. "I guess I sound like some kind of a nut," she said. "But it's not every day you leave your bum of a husband." She glanced at Mike. "Present company excepted," she said.

"Thank you."

"I, uh . . . I'm Alma Watts," the woman said. "That's my married name. That's why it's not the same as Madge's. Although, Madge's isn't the same, either, anymore, because she's married, too. If you get what I mean. What I mean is, my husband's name is Watts. His last name, not his first name. His first name is Roger." She looked suddenly angry. "But don't get me started on Roger," she said. "That bum. I don't ever want to hear his name again. Except, that's hard to do. Because we happen to have the same last name—Watts. So, when I mention my own name—all of it, anyway—I'm forced to mention his name, too. But that won't be forever. Because I plan to—" Ohoho had reappeared. He was very carefully picking up an antique pitcher, and Alma, puzzled, was watching him. Having lifted the priceless

object safely, he departed toward the bedroom area. "You must have an interesting household," Alma said to Mike, Carol and Alice.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Carol said. "Please come in. . . ."

Alma hesitated. "Gee . . . I don't know. With my terrible problem, maybe I ought to be doing something about it."

"Problem?" Mike asked innocently.

Alice winced, then headed back toward the kitchen, not wanting to stay and witness the look of pain on Mike's face when he realized the consequence of his well-meaning question.

"Well, you see. . . ." Alma began. She turned to Carol again. "Have you ever left your bum of a husband?" she asked. "If you have, you know what I mean. It's not the same as planning a road tour—that's show business talk. What I mean is, you don't work out a schedule six months ahead, you sort of do it on the spur of the moment. Which means that the chances are that you'll forget a couple details . . . like taking enough money with you to move into a hotel overnight until your sister comes back from vacation the next day and unlocks her house." She smiled feebly. "Like that."

"Oh, heavens, don't worry about *that!*" Carol said. "Why, Madge and Harvey are a couple of our best friends. Aren't they, Mike?"

"Madge and Harvey who?"

"He's kidding," Carol assured Alma. "You can stay here with us. After all, it will only be overnight. Not that you wouldn't be welcome to stay longer. But I'm positive

Madge and Harvey will be back tomorrow. You know Harvey. He's totally dependable." She looked at Mike again. "Isn't he, dear?"

Mike looked somewhat uncomfortable. "Harvey who?" he replied.

"Mike, what's— Oh! You mean Aunt Zel and Ohoho and the babies and. . . ." Carol faced Alma Watts again. "We have some other company," she said. "But . . . overnight . . . really, it's no problem."

"Gee, that's great," Alma said. "I just don't know what I'd do. It's just lucky that Madge left that note on the door, telling To Whom It May Concern to come over here."

"Lucky for you, but, as a matter of general practice, not too wise," Mike said. "Suppose a burglar had seen that note?"

"That's why Madge left it," Carol told him. "So that if a burglar saw it he wouldn't break into their house, he'd come over here."

"And break into *our* house?" Mike asked, appalled.

"Of course not. We're not away on vacation. He'd see that we're home and he'd go away." She addressed Alma Watts again. "Do you want Mike to help you with your things?"

"Oh, no, that's not necessary," Alma replied, backing away. "I'll just be a minute. . . ." She turned and headed toward her sister's house.

"Well, at least, she doesn't have her babies with her," Mike said. "We just don't have room for anything more. In fact, I don't know where we're going to put her."

"We have that roll-away," Carol reminded him. "We'll

put it in the girls' room and she can sleep in there with them. It will only be for one night."

"I suppose that will work out," Mike nodded. "And, you're right, we couldn't let Madge's sister—" He suddenly fell silent. His mouth dropped open, his eyes glazed over, and he stared in horror in the direction in which Alma Watts had gone.

Startled and slightly fearful, Carol turned to find out what Mike had seen that had affected him so distressingly. She, too, abruptly reacted in horror. Alma was returning, crossing the lawn, and with her she had five boys, ranging in age, Carol guessed, from about sixteen to ten or eight. The boys were dressed in a variety of ways. One looked like an Indian brave; another looked like an Oliver Twist who had left the poor house and then fallen on hard times, a third was dressed in a tight-fitting tweed suit and checkered waistcoat, apparently posing as a thirteen-year-old undergraduate at Harvard or Yale, the fourth, under an enormous slicker, seemed to be posing as a fireman, and the youngest was dressed as a miniature World War I airplane pilot. They were all loaded down with luggage and musical instrument cases.

"Here we come!" Alma called out cheerfully. She indicated the boys. "These are my babies!" she informed Mike and Carol.

Numb and speechless, Mike and Carol simply continued to stare.

"They're show-stoppers, aren't they?" Alma said proudly as she and the boys reached the entrance to the house. "We get that reaction everywhere we go. Let me introduce them," she said. Starting with the oldest and

proceeding to the youngest, she pointed them out as, "Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro and Cinq," then added, "In case I went too fast for you, that's One, Two, Three, Four and Five in German, English, Italian, Spanish and French. You see, being in show business, we move around a lot. Roger and I thought it would be kind of cute to number them after the countries they were born in. Get it?"

Mike and Carol nodded dumbly.

"Say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Brady, boys," Alma said.

The boys stared vacantly back at Mike and Carol. They appeared to be under a spell. They did not even blink.

"They're not exactly talkers," Alma told Mike and Carol. "But, then, Roger always says, anything there is to say, I've already said it, anyway. The bum." She indicated the boys once more. "They're a group," she said.

"They're more like an army," Carol said, intimidated. "We have six, ourselves, but there aren't as many of our six as there are of your five."

"They *do* seem to fill a lot of space," Alma replied. "But when I said they're a group, I meant that in the show business way. A rock 'n' roll group, I mean. We call them The Numbers Racket. It was Roger's idea. Because, you see, instead of names, they have numbers. And the music they play, Roger says it may be music to somebody, but to him it's one big—"

"—racket," Mike nodded, emerging from shock.

"Right."

"Uh, look, Mrs. Watts," Mike began, "normally—"

"Oh!" she broke in, beaming. "And those—are all those *your* babies?"

Mike and Carol turned and saw that Marcia, Jan, Cindy, Greg, Bobby and Peter had entered the foyer and were peering curiously at the Watts boys.

"No, the babies are the ones there on the floor," Mike replied, pointing to the antiques. "These are our children."

Introductions were made. The Brady boys and girls were introduced to the Watts boys. The youngsters then gradually drifted to one side and began conversing in an alien tongue that consisted primarily of such words as groovy, Arlo, bird, gig, and so on. The Brady boys and girls did most of the talking, however. The Numbers Racket's contribution consisted primarily of smiling sweetly, looking sleepy and shifting their weight from one foot to another.

Mike and Carol, meanwhile, were explaining why there was a shortage of space in the house. "Aunt Zel just suddenly appeared, right out of the blue," Carol said. "And she has Ohoho with her. And, then, when you said you were going to get your things, you didn't mention that they were five boys."

"I see exactly what you mean," Alma said sympathetically. "It's really going to be a challenge for you, fitting us all in."

"Actually—" Carol began.

"But I know how Madge will appreciate it," Alma said. "I mean, I know how Madge is. Madge is the kind who will go through fire and water to help other people out. Even total strangers. What I mean by that is, I know that if *your* sister suddenly showed up at Madge's house and she had her babies with her and she'd just left her bum of

a husband but she forgot to take enough money for a hotel, and, besides, she already had all her luggage and stuff right there at Madge's door—" She frowned, looking puzzled. "Where was I? I sort of lost track."

"Never mind . . . I got the message," Carol told her. "The only thing is—"

"You know," Mike said, looking toward the trailer, "there *is* one way. I wonder—" He turned to Ohoho, who had returned to the foyer for another antique. "The trailer," he said, "does it have sleeping accomodations?"

Ohoho, gently raising a bowl from the floor, ignored the question.

"Uh . . . the trailer," Mike said, speaking louder.

Ohoho glared at him threateningly.

"Shhhhh!" Carol warned Mike. "We have to keep our voices down—remember? That bowl is priceless."

"So is my sanity!" Mike said, speaking irritably but quietly. "And if I have to whisper everything I say, I'll go out of my mind before long!"

"Just wait until Ohoho gets all the babies bedded down," Carol said. "After that, we'll probably be able to talk normally. I imagine it's while they're in transit that they're so susceptible to unaccustomed sounds."

Mike shook his head glumly. "Listen to you. The way you're talking, you'd think those antiques were human."

"I treat my babies the same way," Alma said.

Mike looked at the Watts boys, studied them closely for a second, then said, "As if they're human, you mean?"

"Over-protective, I mean," Alma explained.

Ohoho, with the bowl now cushioned against his

paunch, was ready to talk. "Yes, sir?" he said gruffly to Mike.

"I was wondering. . . ." Mike replied. "We have a few more guests." He pointed. "Those boys. I wonder if they could bunk in the trailer. Since the antiques are in here, it's empty, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Tlailer is empty. It is place that Ohoho sleep."

"Oh . . . I see. That's where you sleep. But you don't fill it, do you?" Mike said. "You're large in a way. Around, I mean. But you're not very high. What I'm getting at is, wouldn't there be room for the boys, too? It would only be for one night."

Ohoho looked at the boys. His expression did not alter in the least.

"It would be, well, sort of a favor," Mike said. "Otherwise, I don't know where they'll sleep."

"What can I do?" Ohoho replied resignedly. "I do not have a choice. You win the wall."

Mike looked at Carol, then at Alma, then back to Ohoho. "The wall?" he asked. "What wall?"

"I think he's referring to the war, dear," Carol said. "He has sort of a personal way of saying some things."

Mike peered at her for a second, then faced Ohoho once more. "The war? What war?"

Again, Carol answered. "World War II, Mike," she said. "It was between them and us, partly. Remember?"

"Oh, *that* war," Mike replied. To Ohoho, he said, "Look, that was a long, long time ago. That's all forgotten and forgiven—around *here* it is, anyway. Don't do it for that reason. I mean, don't look at it as a war debt or as

a demand by a conqueror or—" He interrupted himself, looking disgusted. "What am I saying? This is getting preposterous."

"Put in tlailer," Ohoho said, ending the discussion abruptly and walking off toward the bedroom area again. "That how wall start in first place . . . arr that Yankee double-talk!"

"Well, I guess that takes care of that," Alma smiled, relieved. She turned to the group. "Boys, you'll be in the trailer," she said, pointing. "Won't that be fun? It'll be like living in your own private rehearsal studio. I'll be inside the house. If you want anything, just play something. Somebody will hear it."

"All the way inside?" Mike asked.

"And then some," Alma nodded. "As one critic said about us, 'The Numbers Racket isn't the best group in the business, but you can hear it all the way to the surface.' "

Mike and Carol looked baffled.

"That was in a review in the *Mine Workers Journal*," Alma explained. "We're not proud—we play coal mines, submarine launchings, Dairy Queen openings—anything."

"We're a little concerned about Aunt Zel's babies," Carol said. "If they have to rehearse, could they play pianissimo?"

"Gee . . . I don't know. Is that an Italian piano or a new Beatles tune?"

"It means 'softly.' Could they play softly?"

Alma looked doubtful. "Maybe . . . if I can explain to them what softly means," she replied. "It's something they've never been exposed to." She looked uncomfort-

able. "I don't want them to think I'm bugging them. They might start looking for a new manager."

"But . . . you're their mother, you said," Carol replied.

Alma nodded. "You know what people mean when they say, 'That's show biz?' They mean it's just like any other business. Bug a star, and being a mother doesn't count for any more than being a brother-in-law. Whop! Out!"

"Well . . . we'll see how it goes," Mike said, glancing toward the boys, noting how interested in them the girls, especially Marcia, had become.

"Take your bags and instruments into the trailer, boys," Alma called. Then she turned back to Mike. "And if you'll just show me where I'll be sleeping. . . ." she said, smiling.

"In the girls' room," Carol told her. "Mike," she said, "why don't you take Alma's luggage in? She'd probably like to just sit down for a minute."

"Those two," Alma said to Mike, indicating a pair of matching suitcases. "And easy around corners, please. They've been to Berlin, Paris, London, Rome and Madrid without getting a scratch on them, and I'd hate to have to tell my friends that they finally lost their magic in Dullsville . . . or wherever it is we are." She slipped her arm under Carol's and moved into the house. "I always have trouble remembering where Madge lives," she went on. "I think I *try* to forget. Poor Madge. Married to a dull, common-ordinary— Well, you know what I mean. You and Madge are in the same boat. Now, my life, in contrast. . . ."

Carol and Alma had passed beyond Mike's range of hearing. He looked after them sorrowfully for a moment, then turned slightly and faced in the direction of the trailer. The girls, Marcia, Jan and Cindy, were dragging the Watts boys luggage toward it. Greg, Peter and Bobby, meanwhile, were loading the instrument cases into the trailer through the open doorway. The Numbers Racket was standing by, observing emotionlessly.

"I wonder why I have the feeling that when I'm old and gray I won't remember this as my best summer?" Mike said to himself.

He did not answer; the explanation was too obvious. Instead, a little more stooped than he had been earlier that morning, he picked up the bags that had been to Berlin, Rome, Madrid, London and Paris, and started into the house with them. Reaching the doorway, he bumped the right suitcase against the frame, scratching it slightly. Somehow, however, he could not manage to feel too badly about it.

When Mike returned, he went to the living room, where he found Carol and Alma deep in discussion.

". . . but, unfortunately, you have to marry a man or nothing," he heard Alma say as he entered, "that's the only thing there is. Now, if I had my— Oh! Mike! No problem with the bags, I hope."

"It was no trouble at all," he assured her. "In fact, to be completely truthful, I even enjoyed it a little. I wonder," he said, "would you two like a cold drink? I'm sure we must have some soda in the house. After all, *we're on vacation.*"

"From what?" Alma asked.

"Work. I'm an architect."

"Really? I've never known an architect before," Alma said. "I've passed office doors that had a lot of names on them and then something saying that they were all architects. But that's not the same. That's marvelous, being an architect. Let's see, now . . . are you the ones with the hard hats?"

Mike peered at her vacantly.

"When they're putting up buildings," she explained.

He shook his head. "You probably mean a construction engineer or a foreman . . . or anybody who's working—" He shook his head again.

"That's too bad," Alma replied. "If you were one of the ones who wear the hard hats, I'd be able to discuss your work with you. I see the hard hat people a lot in television commercials, and they're all always doing such interesting things. Too bad."

"I *would* sort of like to have something cold to drink, Mike," Carol said quickly.

Gratefully, Mike departed. When he reached the kitchen he found Alice standing aside, while Ohoho, mounted on a small stepladder, was removing canned goods from the shelves of one of the cupboards.

"Don't explain it," Mike said to Alice. "He's clearing off some of those shelves so he can put some of the babies up there, right?"

"That's my guess, too," Alice replied. "He hasn't told me."

"You could have asked," Mike said.

"And get a karate chop right between the sternum and the scapula?"

Mike nodded. "He does look a little dangerous when aroused," he agreed. "Well . . . they won't be here forever, Alice. Keep that in mind. If things get a little . . . you know . . . just remember, it won't last forever."

"That's what they told Anne Boleyn," Alice said dryly.

"Wasn't she the one who—"

"Right. And they told her that just before they put her neck on the chopping block. 'If things get a little . . . you know . . . just remember, it won't last forever.' "

"Well, they were right, weren't they?"

Alice pretended that she had not heard.

Deciding that he would be wise not to pursue the subject, Mike said no more. He got soda and ice from the refrigerator and glasses from a section of the cupboard that Ohoho was not emptying, mixed the drinks, then returned to the living room.

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that," Alma was saying as he entered. "No, personally, as human beings, Roger and I get on famously. In that respect, he's really a nice person. What we disagreed on was business. Business-wise, Roger is a bum." She reached out and got the glass that Mike was offering her. "You're a dear," she told him, keeping her attention fixed on Carol. "I have great respect for Roger, to be absolutely frank, as a man and father," she continued, "but as a prognosticator—and I'm speaking business-wise again—he is nowhere. His problem is, he just doesn't have a woman's intuition."

"Strange. . . ." Mike murmured, putting a glass into Carol's hand.

"I suppose I might as well tell you the whole truth," Alma went on. "You'll drag it out of me, anyway."

"No, please—" Carol said.

"I can't keep a secret," Alma told her. "Anyway, I know you're dying to know. Here's the thing." She sipped her drink. "Delicious. The thing is, we both agree that the boys are at a crossroads, career-wise. Folk, rock 'n' roll, it's had it. At least, that's the way Roger and I both feel. When the rock 'n' roll craze first started and we converted the boys into a group, we said then that rock 'n' roll couldn't last. And here it is, ages later, and finally, everybody's going to find out that we were right all along."

"Well . . . I'm not so sure about that," Mike said, sitting down.

"Dear, I'm sure you mean well," Alma said to him, "but wearing a hard hat doesn't make a person an expert on music trends."

"I don't wear—"

Alma had focused her attention on Carol again. "You see what I mean, don't you?" she said.

"I'm not sure," Carol replied, a bit hazily. "What's the subject again?"

"Roger and me."

"Oh! Yes! But you just said that you and your husband agree—that folk and rock 'n' roll are on the way out. So, what's the problem?"

"The future—business-wise," Alma replied. "Roger thinks there's still a future in music. He wants the boys to become a string quartet."

"All five of them?" Mike smiled.

Alma nodded. "We'd call it Four Fiddles & Ein. That's how we figured we'd get around the problem of having five boys in a quartet. By giving Ein individual billing. To be totally frank, Roger was afraid that if we didn't give him some kind of recognition he might break off and form a group of his own. He's sixteen, you know. Which means that if he's going to make it big as a teenager he has only six more years to go."

"That will make him twenty-two," Mike pointed out. "By then, he'll be three years past being a teenager."

Alma shook her head. "In show business, you're sixteen, seventeen and eighteen for two years in a row," she explained. "That way, in six years, you get only three years older." She faced Carol again. "But I don't want to bore you with technical stuff. As I was saying, here's the thing. It's my feeling that not only has folk and rock 'n' roll had it, but *all* music has had it—for a long while, anyway."

"*All* music?" Carol replied, her eyes widening.

"Think about it," Alma nodded. "Do you realize what we've all been listening to for all these years? Rock 'n' roll nuts have been listening to rock 'n' roll, folk nuts have been listening to folk, jazz nuts have been listening to jazz, Lawrence Welk nuts have been listening to whatever-that-is, opera muffs—"

"I think that's 'buffs,' " Mike said.

"—have been listening to opera, and so on and so on and so on. Now, are you thinking about it? Doesn't it make sense that it's about time that we'd all like to have a

little quiet? I mean nothing. Wouldn't it be heavenly, for a change, to put a record on the machine and hear nothing but absolute and total silence? Think about it."

"I think I'll put some more ice in this drink," Mike said, rising, rattling the cubes in his drink, heading for the kitchen.

"He's a lot like Roger," Alma said to Carol. "*You* understand what I'm saying, though, don't you?"

Carol nodded mechanically.

"Computer programming," Alma told her.

"What?"

"That's what I want for the boys. I want them to get out of music and into computer programming. That means showing the computers what to do. Maybe it's not as glamorous as show business, but it's essential. How would computers know what to do if somebody didn't show them?"

"In a way . . . it's still 'show' business," Carol said, smiling faintly.

"I don't get it, hon."

"*Show*ing the computers what to do. *Show*ing. *Show* business."

Alma shook her head. "That's the computer business," she said.

"I'm sorry," Carol told her. "I thought I saw a little humor and— I'm sorry . . . I got carried away."

"Forgiven," Alma assured her. "Now, as I was saying. . . ."

Carol settled back in her chair, getting as comfortable as possible as Alma talked on and on. After a while she

began to think about how nice it would be if the family had gone away on vacation instead of staying at home, and, right now, they were stranded on a lonely country road with four flat tires . . . in a rainstorm. . . .

3

Mike put his head out of his and Carol's bedroom, testing. He looked and listened. Then, having heard nothing that disturbed him, he signaled for Carol to follow and they emerged from the bedroom and moved quietly down the hallway toward the kitchen.

"I think this is going to work," Mike whispered. "Evidently all of the rest of them are still sleeping."

"I don't doubt it," Carol said. "They were up all night. Mike, do you realize that that racket was still going on at two in the morning?"

"That doesn't mean that everybody was up," Mike said. "The noise was coming from the trailer. So, we only know that the boys were up. And, Ohoho, of course. I don't see how he could have slept with that playing going on in the same room."

"That's exactly what I mean. I couldn't sleep, and I was only in the same neighborhood. So, if *I* couldn't sleep, how could anybody else in the house sleep?"

"Well . . . let's not make a big deal out of it," Mike said. "Madge and Harvey will be back today and Alma and her brood will be leaving. We had one bad night . . . but, we've got the rest of the vacation to make up for it."

"Starting now," Carol agreed. "If we can just have a very quiet breakfast together before the others get up, I think I can get through the rest of the day—no matter *what* happens."

"Exactly why I suggested this," Mike said, as they neared the kitchen. "We'll—" He suddenly halted, causing Carol to stop, too. He had spotted Alice standing outside the kitchen door, leaning against the wall, looking as if she were thinking seriously about going on a rampage. Her rage appeared to be directed at the kitchen door, which was closed.

"Alice, what—" Mike said, bewildered, as he and Carol proceeded.

Alice hooked a thumb in the direction of the door. "In there!" she said. "While I'm out here!"

"*What* is in there?"

"That Japanese laugh track."

"Ohoho?"

"Yes. And your oldest son!" Alice replied. "Ohoho is getting Aunt Zel's breakfast. And Greg is watching him."

"What does he think Ohoho might do?" Carol asked.

"He isn't watching him because he thinks he might do

something sneaky or dangerous," Alice replied, disgusted. "He's watching him because he wants to learn."

"Oh. Well, that's—" Carol looked at her warily. "Learn what?"

"How Ohoho makes breakfast for Aunt Zel."

"Alice," Mike said, "this isn't making a lot of sense. I understand, so far, that Ohoho is getting breakfast for Aunt Zel and that Greg is observing. But why is the door closed?"

"Ohoho closed it and told me to stay out."

"And you let him get away with it?"

"He also told me—in sign language—that if I *didn't* get out, and stay out, he'd retie my apron strings."

"Uh, what, uh—"

"So tight that I couldn't breathe," Alice explained.

"Oh." Mike looked at the door. "Well, we can't have this. That kitchen is part of the castle, and—"

The door opened and Greg looked out. He touched a finger to his lips, requesting quiet, then slipped out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

"Please, Dad, keep it down, will you?" Greg said. "Ohoho is having a little trouble concentrating. You're going to get him angry."

"*Him* angry!" Mike exploded. "If you think—" Greg was anxiously trying to quiet him. "All right, all right," he said, lowering his voice. "But what's going on in there?"

"He's getting breakfast for Aunt Zel," Greg replied.

"That, I understand. But what's the idea of shutting all the rest of us out? We eat, too, you know. Why can't

Alice get in there? It's *her* kitchen, you know, so to speak. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"He has to have absolute quiet and privacy, that's all," Greg replied. "He's doing me a special favor, letting me in. After all, that isn't oatmeal he's making."

"Oh? What *is* he making?" Mike asked.

"He's steaming a humming bird egg."

Mike, Carol and Alice peered at him questioningly and in silence.

"Honest," Greg said. "That's what Aunt Zel has for breakfast every day of her life—one steamed humming bird egg. Ohoho has a big supply in the trailer."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it," Mike said. "But why does it have to be steamed in private? Because it's naked? Is a humming bird egg more shy than a chicken egg?"

"I don't suppose the egg cares," Greg replied. "It's Ohoho who wants the privacy. You see, there's sort of a ceremony that goes with steaming a humming bird egg —the way he does it, anyway. Aunt Zel wouldn't eat it, he says, if it hadn't been blessed by Zahi."

"Zahi?"

"That's the god for steamed humming bird eggs. For poached humming bird eggs, it's Lopa. For fried, it's—"

"Never mind," Mike broke in. "I think I get the picture. He's in there performing some sort of a ceremony, right? And until he finishes he wants us to stay out." He shrugged. "Okay." He looked at his watch. "Is he about finished?"

Greg shook his head. "It'll be a while yet. The whole

thing takes about an hour—including the part where he dusts himself with nutmeg. Then, after that, there'll probably be some cleaning up to do. It'll still be a bit of a wait, I guess."

"That's *our* kitchen!" Mike said, furious.

"But it's *his* custom, Mike," Carol said. "Let's not interfere. Not this time. When Aunt Zel gets up, you can explain to her that it's sort of an inconvenience and maybe she'll lay off humming bird eggs for the duration. Besides, Greg is learning something."

"How to dust himself with nutmeg? What can you do with a thing like that after you learn it? If you don't happen to be a humming bird egg steamer specialist, it's non-productive."

Greg touched the finger to his lips again. "Can you keep it down, please?" he asked. Then he returned to the kitchen, closing the door.

"Well . . . maybe you're right," Mike said to Carol. "After all, Ohoho isn't doing this to inconvenience us. It's just . . . well, just his way of doing things. And we can't blame Aunt Zel, either. She's still asleep, she doesn't know what's going on."

"The whole thing is *our* fault," Alice said. "We should have thought of putting in a second kitchen before Aunt Zel and Ohoho dropped in unexpectedly. As a matter of fact, how do we live in a place like this, without a special kitchen for steaming humming bird eggs? Talk about your poverty, talk about—"

"All right, Alice," Mike broke in. "This is only temporary. Let's try to take it in stride."

"That's what I was doing when you arrived," she replied. "I was counting up to fifty, then I was going in there and make faces at his humming bird egg."

"In stride," Mike cautioned, "in stride. . . ." Then he put a hand on Carol's arm and steered her away, leaving Alice to continue the sentry duty at the kitchen door. "We'll just go into the rec room and relax," Mike said to his wife. "After all, why the panic? We're on vacation. So breakfast is temporarily delayed—so what?"

"Anyway, Ohoho and Greg will probably be out of there by the time the rest of the children get up," Carol replied, agreeing. "Then, we can have a big breakfast all to—"

They had reached the entrance to the recreation room. There, they saw the five Watts boys—Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro and Cinq—and the rest of their own children—Marcia, Jan, Cindy, Peter and Bobby—seated cross-legged on the floor, involved in earnest discussion. The youngsters were not aware of Mike's and Carol's presence.

"Like, what I mean is, you see this feather in my headband?" Ein was saying. Ein was the member of the group who was dressed like an Indian brave. The feather in his headband pointed downward rather than up. "That's my whole philosophy," he went on. "I guess you might call it super cool. I'm so cool, I'm not only not bothered by anything, I'm not even bothered by the fact that I'm not bothered by anything."

Marcia's eyes, Mike and Carol saw, opened wide in fascination. She peered at him as if he had just revealed to her that he was immortal.

"What the feather means," Ein went on, "it means I

put everything down. That way, society will never be in a position to take advantage of me. If I don't care, you see, I'm out of it. And if you're out of it, you can't be in it. Read me?"

"That's beautiful," Marcia said blissfully. "What a beautiful thing if we could all live that way."

Mike whispered to Carol. "Did you hear that? Beautiful? That's sick."

"Maybe not," Carol whispered back. "I didn't really understand it. Maybe if you understand it, it isn't what it sounds like. If Marcia thinks it's beautiful, there must be something to it."

"What there is to it is Ein," Mike whispered. "She's got a crush on him."

"Well, then—"

Peter was speaking. "But suppose somebody did something to you," he said to Ein. "Like somebody cut one of the strings on your guitar. Wouldn't you care about that?"

Ein smiled sweetly and shook his head. "I'd just play without it," he replied.

"What if they cut all the strings?" Cindy asked.

"I'd play without them," Ein answered. He touched his bare chest where he assumed his heart was. "The music comes from in here," he explained.

"That's just beautiful," Marcia said, sighing again.

The other Brady children did not appear to be wholly convinced. Jan evidently decided to change the subject. Addressing Two, she said, "I heard Tre say one of the folk tunes you were playing was yours. Did you *write* it?"

Two nodded. "I write a lot of that stuff," he said. "It's easy. Anybody could do it. All you do is just write about something you know about."

Jan looked doubtful. "I don't know anything about anything except the stuff around the house . . . and stuff at school," she said. "Who wants to hear anybody sing about clunky stuff like that?"

"That's it," Two told her. "That's what *I* write about —the everyday stuff. Stuff that everybody does all the time. Like taking the train from Rome to Paris. Or losing all your luggage and instruments when the air line puts them on the plane to Cairo instead of the plane to London. Regular stuff like that."

"Funny . . . that's never happened to me," Peter said. "About the most exciting thing that ever happened to me was, one morning, Alice forgot and I broke up my own shredded wheat biscuit."

"Yeah . . . regular stuff like that," Two nodded. "There's a folk tune in that. You just have to work it out. Go on—try it. . . ."

Peter thought for a few moments, then began to sing hesitantly.

Came in to breakfast one morning.
Looked at my shredded wheat. . . .
Then a strange thing happened.
Old shredded wheat looked back at

I hadn't ever seen a biscuit
All in one piece before.

But Alice had forgot to crush it.
She'd left it in the bowl all whole.

I got that shredded wheat biscuit
Where I thought its throat would be.
And I squeezed 'til it was all in pieces
And it looked like it ought to look.

Now, maybe you think I'm cruel,
Strangling a biscuit like that.
But it was what the biscuit wanted.
If not, why didn't it speak up?

There was enthusiastic applause from the other Brady children. The Watts boys expressed themselves by not expressing themselves.

"Make up one about how to make a homework essay look long when you haven't got anything to say," Jan said to Peter. "I always have that trouble in school."

"Would that count as a folk song?" Peter asked Two.

"Anything, man."

Peter turned back to Jan. "I'll tell you first, then I'll make a song out of it," he said. "What I do to make it longer is write big. If I want to, I can sometimes fill up a whole line with two words. Let's see, now. I don't know what kind of a song that's going to make, though."

Outside the recreation room, Mike motioned to Carol and they retreated. When they were out of the children's hearing range, they halted.

"Do you realize what her children are doing to our

children?" Mike said. "Did you hear that? Two words to a line!"

"Her children didn't do that to our children," Carol replied. "Peter worked that system out before he ever met the Watts boys."

"Oh . . . yeah, I guess that's right. But how about Super Cool? Do you want Marcia thinking like that? His idea of doing something is to do nothing. If we *all* thought like that, nothing would ever be done."

"He didn't say he wanted us all to think like that, Mike," Carol replied. "He just said that's the way he thinks."

"But it might be catching! Suppose Marcia catches it?"

Carol looked mildly concerned. "Well. . . ." She abruptly brightened. "Those boys will be leaving sometime today," she reminded Mike. "I don't think anything like that, that Marcia was exposed to for so short a time, could turn out to be fatal."

"Yes . . . I suppose that's a point." Mike sighed wearily. "Well, let's see if Ohoho is finished in the kitchen. If I could just get my morning coffee, I think I'd be in better shape to cope with this situation." He led the way back toward the kitchen.

Mike and Carol found Alice still standing at the kitchen door, and it was still closed. She was leaning against the wall as she had been before. Now, however, her eyelids were beginning to droop.

"He's *still* in there?" Mike said gruffly.

Alice started, then remembered why she was standing at the kitchen door. "Still," she replied. "Is this still the same day, or did I sleep through?"

"Enough is enough," Mike announced to Carol and Alice. "I'm going in there." He knocked loudly on the door. "I don't care—"

The door opened a crack and Greg peered out. "Hi, Dad," he said. "It won't be long."

"It's already been *too* long," Mike told him. "Open that door—I'm coming in!"

"But, Dad—"

"Open!"

Reluctantly, Greg eased the door open. Mike peered in, looking past him. He saw Ohoho standing in front of a pot from which steam was rising. With two fingers he was holding a tiny egg over the steam. In his teeth he had a long carving knife. His eyes were closed and he was softly chanting a series of words that Mike could not understand.

Mike hesitated a few moments, then glared. "Now, look here," he said, still in the doorway.

Ohoho opened one eye and peered at him. At the same time, he tightened his jaws and the carving knife began bending in the center, drooping downward at both ends, as if it were made of rubber instead of steel.

Mike's eyes opened as wide as possible. "Uh . . . what I meant was . . . uh . . . keep up the good work." He backed out of the opening.

"It's probably part of the ceremony," Greg whispered.

Mike nodded dimly. He mouthed the words: Close the door. The door closed, shutting Greg inside.

"Why did you change your mind?" Carol asked Mike, perplexed. "I thought you were going to—"

"I just happen to think that people's customs ought to

be respected," Mike said. "If that's the way Ohoho does humming bird eggs, and if it takes that long, then I think he has every right—"

Mike was interrupted—or perhaps drowned out—by a sudden cacophony of sound. It had a certain resemblance to music and it was coming from the direction of the recreation room.

"Aunt Zel!" Mike shouted, horrified.

"That couldn't be her," Alice said. "She's still in her room. She doesn't come out until Ohoho has her humming bird egg ready for her."

"I didn't mean it was *her!*" Mike shouted, competing with the sound of rock 'n' roll. "I meant it'll wake her up!"

The whole house was shaking.

"I thought you designed this house to withstand earthquakes!" Carol said to Mike.

"Earthquakes, yes! Doomsday, no! That's the end of the world you're hearing!" He pointed toward the foyer. "Look!"

A shelf in a corner of the entranceway could be seen. An antique vase that Ohoho had placed on the shelf was shimmying toward the edge.

"Don't just tell me!" Carol answered. "Do something about it!"

Mike raced toward the foyer, arms outstretched. When he was still several feet from the shelf, the vase toppled over the edge and went hurtling toward the floor. Mike dived, caught the vase just before it hit, then landed flat on the floor, losing all his wind.

Following him, Carol and Alice ran into the entranceway.

"Mike, that was marvelous!" Carol said.

"Yeah, could you do it once more for the TV cameras?" Alice said.

Mike could not reply. He was clutching his middle, gasping for breath. Then, abruptly, he began pointing. And, turning, Carol and Alice looked into the living room. The music was causing the antiques that were on the shelves in there to hop up and down, too. And several of them were already dangerously close to the edge.

Carol and Alice dashed for the living room.

Mike, rising, got a glimpse of the rear entranceway. The antiques on the shelves back there were bouncing about, too. Still holding the antique he had just rescued, Mike raced toward the rear of the house. He reached the back entranceway at the same instant that an antique mug fell from a shelf and snatched it from certain destruction. At that same moment, when both of his hands were occupied, another antique, a vase again, toppled over the edge. Mike dropped to the floor beneath it. It dropped onto his midsection, bounced slightly, then rolled to the floor, landing safely.

After scrambling up, Mike began snatching antiques from the shelves, placing them on the floor. As he was taking the last item down, the music abruptly stopped. Panting, sagging, Mike listened. The house was silent. Assuming that Carol or Alice had got to The Numbers Racket and asked it to stop, he began placing the antiques back on the shelves.

A few minutes later, Carol appeared. "Everything out there weathered the blow," she said. "How about in here?"

"Okay, okay," Mike replied, still panting.

"I told them you'd talk to them about playing that loudly in the house," Carol said.

"Oh, boy, will I talk to them!"

"Mike . . . it's not their fault that we have a house full of priceless antiques—temporarily. They didn't know that everything would start bouncing around."

"Didn't know? Have you ever seen pictures of those kids at rock concerts? Jumping around? I've got news for you—they're not jumping. They're being bounced! Like antiques! On a shelf! They couldn't sit still if they wanted to!"

"Even so."

"All right. I guess it wasn't their fault." Mike replied, having placed all the antiques that belonged in the rear entranceway back on the shelves. He headed toward the front of the house, carrying the vase he had rescued by performing a belly-whopper onto the foyer floor. "But we just can't have that around here," he continued. "Not until after Aunt Zel and her babies leave, anyway. I'm just not—"

Mike halted. Carol, a step behind him, stopped also. The kitchen door had opened and Greg had emerged.

"Don't tell me—that racket shattered the egg!" Mike said.

Greg shook his head. "No, it's fine. It's done, that's all."

Mike grinned. "Back to normal." He moved on, and Carol followed again. As they passed the kitchen doorway they saw Ohoho pouring steaming water from the pot into the sink. They did not pause to watch the rest of the process, however. "It's probably still very private," Mike said, hurrying on.

They reached the foyer.

"Go tell the kids we're going to have breakfast," Mike said to Carol. "Then, while we're all at the table, I'll explain to them why we can't have loud music for a while, until Aunt Zel packs up and. . . . Well, just tell them about breakfast."

Carol went on while Mike placed the antique vase back on the shelf, then made certain that all the other antiques in the area were safe. When he had finished, he stepped back to admire his work. At that instant there was a crashing sound. The antiques started dancing around on the shelves again. Mike grabbed here, snatched there, rescuing vases and mugs again. For a moment he had an insane idea that the foyer had somehow got in the way of a cattle stampede. Then the children began appearing from the direction of the recreation room. They were galloping pell-mell for the kitchen. As they thundered past—all ten of them—two vases toppled from the shelves, both at the same time. Again, Mike had to dive. And, because he had to use both hands to catch, he was unable to break his fall. He belly-whopped once more.

Mike was still flat on the floor, an antique in each hand, when Carol and Alice appeared. They studied him interestedly.

"Mike, aren't you over-dramatizing a little," Carol said. "I'm sure the children would get the idea if you'd just tell them. You don't have to stretch out on the floor like that, as if they'd been playing again and you had to make a two-handed catch."

"And a no-handed flop," Alice added.

"I could have killed myself," Mike said tragically.

"I know. That's why I'm telling you, it's *too much*."

Painfully, Mike struggled to his feet. He placed the antiques back on the shelf. "I—" he began. But he changed his mind. Who would believe his story. "Let's have breakfast," he said resignedly.

Unfortunately, when they reached the kitchen, they found they could not get in. It was jam-packed with youngsters.

"They're doing something for themselves," Alice said, impressed and surprised, standing in the kitchen doorway with Mike and Carol. "We keep telling them to learn to do things for themselves—and now they're *finally* doing it."

"Why now?" Mike said irritably. "They could have waited until after I got the coffee on." He pointed to Peter, who was crushing a shredded wheat biscuit into a bowl. "Is he getting breakfast for himself or composing?" he asked.

"They're having some very strange things," Carol said, a little worriedly, watching Ein and Marcia build a sandwich together. "That between the liverwurst and the Jello—I think that's the leftover stew."

"Alice, it's your kitchen, so to speak," Mike said. "You better do something."

Alice shook her head. "It's more dangerous in there now than it was when Ohoho was running amuck with that sword in his teeth," she said. "Anybody who went in there would run the risk of ending up in a corn flakes, boiled eggs, liverwurst, onion, leftover baked potato and cranberry sauce sandwich."

"We better wait 'till it's over," Carol said, getting Mike by the sleeve and pulling him away. "Remember what you said? We're on vacation. What's the rush about breakfast?"

Shaking his head glumly, Mike allowed himself to be steered away from the kitchen area and down the hall. On the way, he said, "I wonder what happened to Greg and Ohoho. I didn't see them in there."

"I saw them," Alice said. "They were between two slices of rye."

"No, I mean it—what happened to them?" Mike said. "I wonder if—" He halted, thought a second, then moved on, changing direction, heading toward the dining room. "If that delicacy was for her," he said, "then Aunt Zel ought to be—"

He, Carol and Alice reached the entrance to the dining area. They found the rest of the occupants of the house—minus one—there. Aunt Zel was seated at the head of the table, spooning her humming bird egg from an egg cup. Greg was seated at her right, watching her fascinatedly. Ohoho was standing nearby, arms crossed, looking as if he were on guard.

"Oh, there you are!" Aunt Zel said brightly, sighting Mike, Carol and Alice. "Slept late, did you? Usually, I'm the last one up."

"We're not exactly just now getting up," Carol said.

"To be actually factual," Mike said, "we were up most of the night. The musical accompaniment, you know. . . ."

Aunt Zel was looking at him bewilderedly. "Musical accompaniment?"

Mike entered the dining area, followed by Carol and Alice. "You didn't hear it? Last night . . . from the trailer . . . the rock?"

Aunt Zel laughed. "Oh, my, no," she replied. "I always wear ear plugs when I go to bed. I never hear a thing from the time I lie down until the time Ohoho wakes me in the morning."

"Then, this morning . . . you didn't hear all *that* racket, either?" Carol asked.

"I'm sorry, dear. Did I miss anything worthwhile?"

Carol shook her head. "Actually, it was more interesting to see than to hear," she replied. "Mike took a dive that—"

"Carol," Mike said hurriedly, "I don't think Aunt Zel would be interested in that. Besides, her humming bird is getting cold."

"Egg, dear," Aunt Zel smiled. "Only the egg, not the whole bird." She began eating again. "I was just telling dear Greg about the time in Djakarta when we ran out of humming bird eggs. It was during an unpleasantness, and

we were pinned down—as the phrase goes—in our suite in the hotel. Well, I thought—"

"Excuse me, Aunt Zel," Greg said. "You left out the most important part." He turned to his father and Carol and Alice. "When she says 'we,' she means her and a maharajah and a princess and a duke and a shipping tycoon," he told them.

"Gee, I'm glad I found that out," Alice replied. "I don't think I could take any more big news like that this morning, though," she said, backing away. She waggled her fingers in a gesture of parting. "I'm going to try the kitchen again."

"Charming woman," Aunt Zel said, as Alice left. "She reminds me of Her Highness."

"She can get pretty uppity sometimes," Mike agreed.

"You were telling us about Djakarta, Aunt Zel," Greg reminded her.

"Oh, yes," Aunt Zel smiled. "Well, there we were, pinned down in my suite, as I said, and days had passed since the last plane from the continent had been allowed to land at the airport. So—"

"That's why they were out of humming bird eggs," Greg explained. "They hadn't been able to get a fresh supply because there was a revolution or something and the planes weren't able to land."

"Right, got it," Mike nodded drearily, sitting down at the table. "I'm glad you told me that, Greg."

"It'll probably add a lot to the story," Carol agreed, seating herself, too.

"There was no way, of course, that the maharajah could either telephone or telegraph his people in Rangoon," Aunt Zel went on. "The lines were out, you see. Well, we were all quite downcast about the situation. . . ."

Mike only half-listened as Aunt Zel went on with the tale. His thoughts were on food. Images of pancakes and eggs and bacon and cereal with fruit skipped through his mind. And, as if thinking that he might be able to dip into one of the imaginary servings, he idly picked up a spoon. Unfortunately, he did more with it than simply hold it. Preoccupied, he tapped it against a water glass. There was a tinkling sound, and then, a split-instant later, there was the sound of a crash. It came from the direction of the foyer.

"My Louis XVI vase!" Aunt Zel said, horrified. "Michael! I warned you about unnecessary noise! You broke it!"

Stunned, Mike stared at her for a second. Then apologetically, he said, "I just—I just—" He pantomimed what he had done, tapping the air instead of the glass with the spoon.

But Aunt Zel was on her way toward the foyer, followed by Greg and Ohoho. Before leaving, she had glared at Mike in total disgust.

Mike looked at Carol. "That's unbelievable," he said. "She even knew which one it was. How did she know that?"

"That? That's the easiest part about it," Carol answered. "It was one of her babies. Every mother knows her own."

Mike's shoulders drooped. He slid down lower in the chair. "If we'd gone away on vacation," he said, "we'd be getting near the Grand Canyon by now. And I could look forward to throwing myself in."

4

Aunt Zel took the pieces of her broken vase to her (Mike's and Carol's) bedroom, and refused to respond when Mike, at the door, tried to apologize. Mike would have insisted that she listen. But Ohoho was also at the door. And he began to look as if he intended to roll Mike down the hall like a bowling ball. So, Mike returned to the dining room.

There, he found that Carol had been joined by Alma Watts. Alma greeted Mike cheerfully, even warmly. He was a bit surprised, considering that the day before she had been treating him somewhat as if he were a stand-in for her bum of a husband. Seating himself at the table, he told Carol about Aunt Zel's refusal to let him apologize.

"Give her time," Carol said. "She'll realize that it

wasn't your fault. It's just too soon . . . the tragedy is so fresh in her mind."

"I still can't figure out how it happened," Mike said. "A little tap on a glass . . . and splat!" He shook his head, baffled. "Yet, all that racket last night, and not one thing got broken."

"What racket last night?" Alma asked.

"That racket—" He stared at her. "You didn't hear it? That rack— That music, that is, from the trailer. Everybody heard it. Except Aunt Zel. But that was because she was wearing ear plugs."

"Oh, that explains it," Alma smiled. "I always wear ear plugs, too. Ever since the boys learned to play instruments. They sometimes practice and rehearse at odd hours."

Mike started to rise. "I need my coffee—" he said. "A little more of this—"

"Mike, wait," Carol said. "Alice is getting it. The kitchen has been vacated and she's getting breakfast for us. She'll bring it in a minute."

Mike settled back into his chair. "There *is* a U.S. Cavalry," he sighed.

Alma leaned forward. "What?"

"What I mean is, if I can believe that this horrible morning is about over—it will end when I get my coffee —then I can even believe in the U.S. Cavalry. The U.S. Cavalry that's always riding up in the nick of time to save the wagon train from the Indians in those old western movies."

"I think that's absolutely fabulous, having a sense of

humor, after all that's happened to you," Alma said, awed. "You know what my bum of a husband would be doing right now? He'd be hiding under the bed."

"I'd be hiding under the bed, too," Mike said, "if I could get to my bed. It's in my bedroom. And Aunt Zel has it."

Alma shook her head. "No, you wouldn't," she told Mike. "You're too strong. You're a mighty oak." She turned to Carol. "You just don't realize how lucky you are," she said. "I didn't realize it, either, until this morning. I admit it, I thought that being square and living this square life, the way you and Mike do, was sort of uuuuuk. But now I see it in a very different light. Do you realize it's almost noon? And I've been up only a short while? I never got to sleep 'til noon when I was in show business."

"I don't—" Carol began.

"People think there's nothing but glamor to show business," Alma went on. "But they're wrong. Show business is hustle and bustle and hurry and scramble. Do you know how many hours it takes to hammer out a contract for the boys to be on stage for just a couple hours? Centuries, practically. And the tension. You just don't know anything about tension until you get into show business and your act gets a couple bad notices. Do you know what happens when you get bad notices? Tension!"

"Well, things don't always run smoothly around here, either," Carol said defensively. "And, occasionally, I get bad notices, too." She turned to Mike. "Remember that meat loaf I made last Wednesday?"

Mike nodded. "In a word: uuuuuuk."

"See, my act gets bad notices sometimes, too," Carol said to Alma.

"But, sweety, you can *do* something about it," Alma told her. "You can call in a caterer. But when The Numbers Racket is having an off night, can I send out for The Cowsills?" She shook her head. "You simply don't appreciate what you have." She faced Mike and smiled adoringly. "A doll. A sense of humor in the morning. If I even speak to my bum of a husband before late afternoon, you know what he does?"

"Hides under the bed?" Carol guessed.

Alma shook her head. "He borrows my ear plugs."

"You mean you stay quiet until late afternoon?" Mike said dubiously.

"I didn't say that. I talk. A person *has* to talk. I just don't address any remarks to Roger. But you," she said, "I started right out speaking to you. I said 'Hi,' when you came in, and you said, 'Hi' right back. You didn't even *look* like you wanted to clobber me. You know what you are, Mike? You're the perfect husband."

Mike chuckled. "Well. . . ."

At that moment, Alice arrived with breakfast for Carol, Alma and Mike. She placed the food in front of them, then excused herself. "I have to get to the grocery store," she explained. "Those kids not only cleaned out the refrigerator, they got everything from the shelves, too—all except the antiques."

"I'm surprised," Mike said. "How did they miss the antiques?"

Alice lowered her voice. "I only said that in case Aunt Zel might be listening," she said. "Actually, one of those plates had artificial cherries on it when Ohoho put it up there, but now all it has is artificial stems."

Mike peered at her in horror.

"Only kidding," Alice assured him. "Relax." Then she left.

"Yes, Mike . . . relax." Carol said. "Remember, Aunt Zel will probably be with us for a few more days—or weeks. And we're going to take her in stride. Try to keep that in mind—in stride."

Mike nodded dimly, then sipped his coffee.

"Poor dear," Alma said sympathetically. "He needs to get his mind off those antiques. Mike," she said, "tell me about architecture."

He put his coffee cup down. "*What* about it?"

"Oh, anything," Alma replied, fluttering a hand. "Tell me *all* about it. Start from the beginning. It will relax you."

"You don't know what you're saying," Carol told Alma. "He really *can* tell you all about it from the beginning. It takes hours. I know—I've heard it."

"I think that's just marvelous!" Alma said to Mike. "Imagine—knowing *all* about architecture! Why, I'm only a little younger than you, and I don't know a *thing* about it. Oh, sure, I know about the hard hats. But probably everybody who watches TV commercials knows that." She fluttered her eyelashes at Mike. "You just go right ahead and tell me everything."

"Well, as a matter of fact," Mike said, "it's really very

interesting. Now, when we speak of architecture, of course, what we mean is a method of construction in which the human requirements and the building materials involved have been so dealt with as to provide a practical and aesthetic solution, thus differing from the pure utility of engineering construction."

"Gee, how do you remember a thing like that?" Alma asked.

"Remember it? I was giving you a working definition of architecture."

"Right. But I don't see how you remember it. I mean, when you get a job to build a building, do you have to explain that whole thing to whoever hires you every time?"

Mike shook his head. "Forget about the definition. I'll try to show you how the whole thing evolved. Now, to the layman, architecture seems like nothing but style. This kind of style was the vogue once, another style followed it, and now we have another style. But the earlier styles were really experimentation, leading up to the present style. And the present present style. And the present style—"

"Excuse me," Carol said, rising. "I think I hear someone calling me."

"Who?" Mike asked, frowning.

"Anybody," Carol answered. "I'm not fussy."

Departing, Carol heard Mike say, "When I speak of style— Well, let me put it this way: do you know what an arch is?"

"Sure, it's a kind of support."

"Right. Now—"

"But I didn't know architects worked on shoes. Who needs a hard hat for a shoe?"

"No, when I say an arch is a kind of support, I'm not talking about an arch support. Leave shoes out of this—"

Carol passed beyond the range of hearing. From the dining room, she went directly to the rear of the house, then out the back door. Her intended destination was Madge's and Harvey's house. She hoped to find that they had returned from the East. Because it appeared to Carol that Alma, having discarded her own husband, bum that he was, had settled her sights on Carol's husband. The easiest solution to the problem, she had decided, was to get rid of Alma as soon as possible.

Reaching the house next door, Carol knocked on the door. The note that Madge had left, she saw, was still in place. It was a bad sign. An even worse sign was that no one was responding to the knock. Carol rapped on the door a few more times, with the same result, then, discouraged, left and headed home. Passing the garage, she looked in. Madge's and Harvey's car was not there. Clearly, they had not yet returned. Perhaps they would not get in until late in the day. Maybe not even until night. Obviously, Alma Watts and The Numbers Racket would be with the Bradys a few more hours.

Carol reached her own house and entered. Passing the entrance to the dining room, she heard Mike explaining to Alma what kept an arch from collapsing in the middle.

As long as Mike kept talking, she told herself, she had little to be concerned about. When he got on the subject of architecture that was all that interested him.

On her way to the bedroom to try to apologize to Aunt Zel—on Mike's behalf—for the broken vase, Carol met Greg in the hallway. He looked somewhat glassy-eyed, as if he had been put under a spell. Carol stopped him.

"Greg!" she said, moving a hand back and forth in front of his eyes. "It's me—Carol. Remember?"

"Oh . . . hi." he smiled. "I was just in to see Aunt Zel. She sent a message to Dad. She forgives him. Isn't that great?"

"Well . . . he might have survived without it," Carol said. "And you know, that wasn't exactly your father's fault. In the first place, this is no place for a lot of precious antiques. And in the second place, all he did was tap a glass with a spoon. No court in the world would—" She moved the hand in front of Greg's eyes again. "Are you listening?"

"Sure. What's he being sued for?"

"Who?"

"Dad. You said he's going to court."

"Skip it," Carol said. "Greg you're not ill, are you? You look sort of. . . . Well, sort of . . . well, ill."

He laughed. "I'm fine," he said. "I was just thinking."

"That can do it," Carol nodded. "Why don't you just lay off for vacation. You can start thinking again when you go back to school."

"Not that kind of thinking," Greg said. "I was just

thinking how great it must be to be Aunt Zel. Look at the life she leads. All the people she knows. Her Highness. Prime ministers. Tycoons. Princes. Dukes. Boy!"

"And one humming bird egg for breakfast—that's what impresses me," Carol said. "How many people besides her do we know who have one humming bird egg for breakfast every day? Two humming bird eggs, maybe. But *one*—that's something different."

"I mean it very seriously," Greg told her. "Do you know what Aunt Zel is? She's one of those power-behind-the-throne kind of people. I mean, she isn't famous, and she isn't a princess or queen or prime minister or tycoon herself, but she has a lot of influence on all those people. That's pretty exciting."

Carol thought for a moment, then nodded. "I guess it could be," she agreed. "If she really has any influence. Not everybody some people know has a lot of influence on them, though—if you know what I mean."

Greg shook his head.

"I mean, knowing a prime minister doesn't guarantee that he pays any attention to you."

"Well, even so," Greg said, "she's in on everything that's happening—all the important things. Like the ups and downs of the world monetary system, and the military and political conflicts in the Middle East and the Far East, and the common market, and—"

"Hold it," Carol said. "You mentioned the common market to her earlier and she didn't know what you were talking about."

"She just didn't know for sure that she could trust me," Greg said. "That was subterfuge, pretending she didn't know what I meant. She didn't want to get involved in a conversation about it and let some secret slip out."

Carol looked at him doubtfully. "Did *she* tell you that?"

He shook his head. "I figured it out."

"Oh. Well—"

"Carol, do you think we'll ever be pinned down in a hotel suite in Djakarta?" Greg asked.

"Greg, you know we decided not to go away on vacation this year."

"Ever, I mean."

"Well, maybe not. But there's the Grand Canyon, you know. I realize. . . ."

She had lost Greg. He was moving on down the corridor, in a trance once more.

"It's not impossible that we could get pinned down in a Holiday Inn somewhere!" Carol called after him. "In Wheeling, West Virginia, even, if we play our cards right!"

Greg turned a corner.

"Oh, well," Carol said to herself, "he'll get over it in time."

She turned and headed back along the corridor, intending to return to the dining room to tell Mike that Aunt Zel had forgiven him. A second later, a young girl appeared from around the corner that Greg had so recently turned. She looked vaguely familiar to Carol. The

way she was dressed, however, made it obvious that she was a stranger. She was wearing a rain poncho that covered her like a tent from the neck down. On her head she had a straw hat that had been almost completely obscured with artificial flowers. Resting on the bridge of her nose was a pair of dark granny glasses. Carol's first inclination was to pass her by, pretending not to have seen her. But then she realized that she was not in a public building, but in her own house, and that the girl was either an intruder or—"Marcia?" Carol asked, halting.

"Hi, Mom," the young girl replied. She raised two fingers in a V configuration. "Peace," she said.

Carol nodded dumbly. "Peace to you, too," she replied. She frowned. "Let's see . . . it's much too early in the year for Halloween, and—" She suddenly brightened. "A costume party!" she said. "And you're going as. . . . As. . . ." She shrugged. "I give up."

"Mom, that's not funny."

"I'm serious," Carol assured her. "What are you?"

"I'm me," Marcia replied. "This is the real me. That other thing wasn't me; it was you. I was a carbon copy of you. But now I'm me. All me."

"Are you *sure* that's you?" Carol asked painfully. "Are you positive you're not just a carbon copy of somebody else now?" She looked her up and down. "I don't recognize you. Whose poncho?"

"Oh . . . it's Ein's."

"Aha!"

"What does that mean?" Marcia asked defensively.

"Aha!—that's what it means," Carol replied. She made revolving motions with her hands, indicating her perplexity. "Are you going to dress that way from now on?" she asked. "Should I put in a stock of oversize ponchos?"

"Mother, that would be materialistic," Marcia told her. "Anyway, I'm not even sure I'll be wearing this tomorrow. I may change completely. That's me. I'm an ever-changing person. Think about it. For instance, yesterday, what was I?"

"Well, as far as I know—"

"A pumpkin," Marcia told her. "Now, I'm a free spirit. Tomorrow, if things work out, I'll be a canary."

"You've been busy, all right," Carol said. "But, honey, don't forget—" She interrupted herself. Looking at Marcia closely, she said, "If what works out? And when you say 'canary,' do you mean that in the same way you meant it when you said 'pumpkin,' or do you mean—" Her eyes narrowed. "What exactly do you mean?"

"A canary, Mom, is a singer. A singer with a group, for instance."

"Now, we're getting somewhere. What group is it that you might become a canary with if everything works out all right and what is 'everything,' and, honey, for heaven's sake, you don't mean The Numbers Racket, do you?"

"Well . . . sort of . . . yes. . . ." Marcia replied. "Ein

says that if I can prove myself maybe I can go on the road with them."

"*Prove yourself how?*" Carol asked fiercely.

"Singing."

"Oh."

"What did you think?"

"Never mind what I thought. By 'on the road,' do you mean touring with them? From city to city? From Rome to Paris to London to—*is that* what you mean?"

"Naturally," Marcia answered.

Carol thought about the prospect for a moment. She had no intention whatsoever of letting Marcia join The Numbers Racket. She decided, however, that she would probably not have to tell Marcia that she could not go on the road. Marcia had a nice enough speaking voice, but as a singer she— Well, the school chorus had not exactly fought for her services.

"Has Ein heard you sing, dear?" Carol asked, optimistic once more.

"No. I have to learn some lyrics first," Marcia replied. "But he says it doesn't matter whether I have a voice for singing or not. Not caring is really the only thing that counts, he says. And even that isn't important."

Carol blinked, thinking again. "You missed me," she said. "Right over my head."

"You couldn't possibly understand it, Mom," Marcia told her. "Nobody in your generation could."

"Just try me once more," Carol pleaded. "Maybe I wasn't listening close enough the first time."

"What I said was, it isn't important to have a voice. Be-

cause what a canary communicates comes from the inside."

"Singing your heart out, that's called," Carol nodded. "I know what you mean. Boy, if I've seen that movie once, I've seen it—"

Marcia was shaking her head. "No, Mom, not that corn. What I mean is, if I communicate the real me when I sing, it isn't important whether I've got a good voice or a bad voice. Because, basically, what *is* a good voice or a bad voice? It's only what people hear. And what people hear is completely unimportant in comparison to what they feel. Do you know what we mean when we say that what's really the most important thing of all is for people to touch each other?"

"We *all* have bad voices?" Carol guessed.

"Mom, you're not with it."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"Okay. Anyway, that's what Ein means when he says it isn't important whether I can sing or not. According to him, it isn't even important for me to learn the lyrics. Because what's heard is nothing, but what's felt is everything."

"Well . . . I'm glad he thinks something is important," Carol said.

Marcia shook her head again. "It isn't important in the way your generation uses the word," she said. "According to Ein, just because what's felt is everything, that doesn't make it any more important than what's heard, which is nothing. If you try to decide between the two, he says, then you're getting yourself involved.

And involved is just another word for the rat race, he says."

Carol reached out blindly. "If I could just sit down for a minute. . . ."

"Mother, don't *try* to understand it," Marcia advised. "Just live it."

"Dear—" Carol heard the sound of the phone ringing. "Just a minute . . . maybe that's Madge . . . or Harvey . . . or—" She headed for the kitchen. "Stay right there," she called back to Marcia. "At least, don't you *dare* go on the road until—"

Alice had appeared. "It's for you," she said to Carol.

"Madge?" Carol asked hopefully.

"As a matter of fact, yes. But—"

"There *is* a U.S. Cavalry!" Carol cried exultantly, dashing past her, headed for the kitchen. Arriving there a few seconds later, she snatched up the receiver and shouted:

Carol: Madge! It's you!

Madge: Yes, dear. My, I'm surprised that you're so cheerful about it. Well, that's the way to be. Take the bitter with the better, I always say.

Carol (apprehensively): There's something I don't know, isn't there?

Madge: Oh, my. I thought Alice had told you. She told me about Alma and the boys, so I assumed that she'd told you about Harvey.

Carol (getting a firm grip on the edge of the counter): All right—I'm ready. Tell me about Harvey.

Madge: It isn't *that* serious, dear. It's only a sprain; it's not a break. The doctor says he'll be fine again in a few days.

Carol (relieved): That's great! I was really worried for a second. I thought Harvey might have chicken pox or something. But a sprain! That's nothing. He'll *like* having company.

Madge: Carol, I don't think—

Carol: Really! I mean, we've loved having them here. Frankly, Madge, I'll be sorry to see them leave. They've been great company for the children. Ein and Marcia hit it off immediately. But, they are your relatives . . . and I think Alma really needs someone close at a time like this, when she's left her bum of a . . . when she's left Roger, that is. Now, you just stay right where you are and I'll send them right over.

Madge: Carol, if you'll just let me get a word in edgewise. We're not at home. We're in Las Vegas.

Carol (looking aghast at the receiver): This is a long distance call?

Madge: Yes. As we were leaving the hotel here, Harvey slipped and sprained an ankle. His driving ankle. So, we have to stay here until it gets better. You know how Harvey is, he won't ride in the car when I'm driving. He wouldn't even cross the desert—even with nobody else on the road—he says, with me at the wheel. So, we'll just have to stay here a few more days. And Alma and the boys—

Carol (nodding tragically):—will have to stay with us.

Madge: It's certainly lucky that you're enjoying them so much.

Carol: Lucky.

Madge: To be perfectly truthful, even though Alma *is* my sister, I don't think— Well, perhaps I'd better not say it.

Carol: You don't have to say it.

Madge: I have to hang up now, dear. I hear Harvey crying out in pain.

Carol: That's not Harvey, that's me.

Madge, however, had hung up before Carol had managed to deliver her closing statement. Carol sighed gloomily, then dropped the receiver into the cradle and headed for the dining room. As she entered, she heard Mike telling Alma the difference between an upright and a cross beam, and she realized that he was still in the introduction of his explanation of architecture.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Carol said drearily. "But I just had a call from Madge."

"Oh," Alma replied, disappointed.

Then Carol told Mike and Alma what Madge had said.

"Isn't that terrible!" Alma smiled, looking absolutely delighted. "But it's so true, isn't it, that every cloud has a silver lining. I was just thinking about how wonderful it's been being here, learning about your way of life—which is so different from *my* way of life. My *old* way of life, that is. And I was saying to myself, 'Oh, Alma, would that this could go on and on and on forever!' And then, right out of the blue, Madge called with that terrible but timely news about Harvey. Now, I'll be here for a short

while, at least, if not forever." She sighed luxuriously. "It will be so . . . so different . . . so peaceful . . . sleeping every day until noon . . . the pastoral quiet . . . the trees . . . the cows in the meadow. . . ."

"You're getting carried away," Carol warned. "As for sleeping 'til noon—" Alma, she saw, was not listening. She had refocused on Mike.

"What was that about a mortar and pestle again," Alma said to Mike, smiling at him dreamily.

"You have the wrong profession," he answered. "Not mortar and pestle. That's pharmacy. Post-and-lintel, I said. That's system of support. Now, the post-and-lintel, linked with the arch—"

Carol recognized the lead-in. The subject was architecture once more. She watched for a while as Alma Watts stared at Mike in total fascination. Soon, however, she realized that if she didn't get out of the dining room she would say something unpleasant and regret it. So, she departed.

In the corridor, she met Greg again. He was now wearing his best suit—the one he had worn to the wedding when Carol and Mike had married. Heretofore, near force had always had to be used to get him dressed up. Now, evidently, it had been his own idea.

"A formal softball game?" Carol asked.

Greg winced. "I don't play games like that anymore," he replied.

"No kidding? Gee, it seems like only yesterday that—In fact, *wasn't* it only yesterday?"

"Sometimes a change happens overnight," Greg said. He looked around, up and down the corridor, then, low-

ering his voice, he said, "Carol, now, be truthful. When you first saw me—just now, I mean—what was your first thought? Was it: international personality?"

"I take the Fifth Amendment," Carol replied.

5

Mike was unavailable to Carol the rest of the day. He spent it wandering about the house with Alma Watts at his side, listening raptly as he held forth on the glory of architecture. That evening, when Carol tried to talk to him to tell him about the overnight change in Greg and Marcia, she found that holding a conversation with her husband was impossible. He could not respond; after talking straight through most of the day he was so hoarse that the best he could produce vocally was a half-squeak.

By the next morning, however, he had got his voice back. And as he and Carol stood outside the kitchen door with Alice, waiting for Greg and Ohoho to complete the humming bird egg steaming ceremony, they discussed the plight of the two older children.

"They're under a spell, both of them," Carol said.

"Greg is mesmerized by Aunt Zel, and Marcia has a king-sized crush on Ein Watts."

"They'll go away," Mike replied calmly.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Marcia is already talking about going on the road."

"Not the children, the spells," Mike replied. "The spells, I mean, will go away."

Carol shook her head. "I don't think so. This is more serious than that. What will happen is, Aunt Zel and Ein Watts will go away, and Marcia and Greg will . . ." Her eyes became moist. ". . . they might try to go with them!"

"No, they won't," Mike assured her. "Number one, I won't let them. And, number two—" He frowned. "Do you *really* think it's that serious?" he asked.

"You saw how Marcia is dressed. Do you think she got herself up in that getup just to parade around the house? Them's travelin' clothes."

"I still can't believe that—"

"And look at Greg. In his best suit. And it was *his* idea. Your son! He dressed up! Without being forced to! And you don't think that's serious?"

"She's got a powerful argument there," Alice said. She nodded toward the kitchen. "Greg is dressed up again this morning," she said. "Your son! Dressed up! In the morn—"

"All right, all right," Mike interrupted. "I'm convinced, it's something to worry about. Still . . . I don't want to just order them—neither Greg nor Marcia—to not be attracted to the kind of life that Aunt Zel and Ein live. It *is* exciting, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing.

And *telling* them not to be fascinated would be pointless. I'll just have to . . . well, think of some other way of persuading them that living here with us is exciting, too —in a way."

"Handcuff them to their beds—that's my advice," Alice said.

"That's barbaric."

"Maybe so. But trying to sell them on the idea that their life, as it is, is exciting won't work, and handcuffing them to their beds will. That's the choice."

"Well . . . maybe their life isn't exciting," Mike admitted. "But it's . . . well, it's satisfying."

"How much exactly is that worth on the open market to a teenager?" Alice asked.

"Mike, Alice is right," Carol said. "You better think up a better reason."

He nodded, admitting the wisdom of her statement. "Well . . . I'll think of something . . . then I'll talk to them. In the meantime, let's just not panic. I figure that—"

The door to the kitchen opened. Greg, neatly garbed in his best suit, but perspiring as a result of the steam in the kitchen, stepped out. "All yours—in a couple minutes," he announced. "I'm going to wake Aunt Zel now and tell her her humming bird egg is ready." He smiled fleetingly, then moved on along the corridor.

"Maybe he isn't my son anymore," Mike said worriedly. "Maybe his body has been inhabited by the ghost of Little Lord Fauntleroy."

"Couldn't have a ghost. That's a fictitious character," Carol said.

Mike pointed to his son, who was about to turn a corner. "So is that," he said.

At that same moment, Ohoho emerged from the kitchen. He was carrying the humming bird egg in an egg cup. Moving past Mike, Carol and Alice, he gave them not a glance. When he disappeared into the dining room, they shrugged in unison, then dashed into the kitchen to prepare their own breakfast.

A short while later, Mike and Carol, carrying their breakfasts on trays, moved in to the dining room—just in time to see Aunt Zel and Greg departing.

"He's like her shadow!" Mike said irritably as he and Carol settled at the table.

"I know, I know. I told you—it's serious."

"What's serious?" Alma Watts asked, entering the dining room, looking very un-morninglike. She was smiling radiantly—in Mike's direction—and was dressed in sequined lounging pajamas. "How could *anything possibly* be serious on a gorgeous morning like this?" she chirped. "Know what I saw just now? A bird! I looked out my window, and there in a tree, big as life, and do you know what it *said* to me?"

" 'How can you stand sequins in the morning?' " Carol guessed.

Alma laughed delightedly. "No! It said, 'Get up, get up, you sleepy head! Today's the day!' "

"Did it mean anything by that?" Carol asked. "Or is that its only line?"

Alma joined them at the table. "It meant freedom for you!" she said to Carol, still bubbling. "I decided last night what I'm going to do to repay you for all your wonder-

ful hospitality! I'm going to take over for you!" She turned her dazzling smile on Mike. "Isn't that exciting?"

"Well—"

"It depends on what you mean," Carol replied, replying for Mike, eying Alma suspiciously. "When you said 'take over for me,' you didn't by any chance mean 'take over *from* me,' did you? There's a difference." She suddenly looked baffled. "Take over what? Or should I make that 'take over whom?' "

"What," Alma replied. "Your house. Well, not exactly your house. What I mean is, from now on, while I'm here, everything you usually do, I'll do instead. I'll take your place."

Carol glanced at Mike, then faced back to Alma. "Oh, no, you don't," she replied.

"Carol," Mike said, "I don't think you understand. Alma is talking about taking over the running of the house."

"If that's what you think Alma is talking about, then it's you who don't understand," Carol replied grimly.

"Oh, my heavens!" Alma giggled. "Mike . . . Carol is pretending to be jealous! Of li'l ol' me! Isn't that simply mahhhhvelous?"

Mike looked from one woman to the other, then, without replying, resumed eating, aware that anything he might say would be used against him.

"Dear, you must let me do it," Alma said to Carol. "I owe it to you. You've been so kind. Why, the boys already think of your house as their home—and they don't even sleep in. Besides, to be absolutely truthful, I have sort of a selfish reason."

"I can hardly believe it," Carol replied.

"I need the practice," Alma said. "I've definitely made up my mind, the square life is the life for me. But I realize that it's not all sleeping 'til noon. I want to find out exactly what the rest of it is like. So, please, dear? Let Alma be Carol for a few days? Let me take over. I mean completely. Absolutely completely."

"Why not?" Mike said to Carol. "After all, we're on vacation, aren't we? That sounds like a great offer to me. Why don't you take advantage of it?"

"You could relax completely," Alma said. "Just sort of fall all apart, you know."

"All apart how?" Carol asked warily.

"Just let go . . . go loose. . . ." Alma replied. "Darling, you'll adore it once you try it, and it will do wonders for those age lines."

Carol looked suddenly horrified. "*What* age lines?"

Alma laughed teasingly. "Just a little joke," she replied. "But, now that you mention it . . . ." She was frowning, peering closely at Carol's face. ". . . around the eyes. . . ."

"Maybe you're right, maybe I better rest," Carol nodded. She rose to her feet. "If I could lie down for a while. . . ."

Alma leaped up and hurried to her side. "I'll help you into the recreation room," she said. "There's a couch in there, and—"

Carol shook Alma off. "I can still walk by myself!" she said crisply. Then, abruptly, she brightened. "The more I think about it, the better I like your idea," she told Alma. "I tried to tell you before that sleeping 'til noon is

not all there is to taking care of a house and six children. In fact, sleeping 'til noon is not *any* part of it. This, though, will give you a great opportunity to find out for yourself what I mean." She smiled smugly. "Yes, your idea gets more appealing by the minute."

"Carol—" Mike began.

"No, I think Alma has a splendid notion," Carol told him. "If she's seriously thinking about settling down to the square life, then she *should* get to know what it's really like." She headed for the doorway. "Call me when you get desperate," she said, speaking to Alma. "I'll come when I hear the 'Help! Help! Help!' "

"Since you're the guest," Alma replied, hustling after her, "the first thing I'll do is make sure that you're comfortable. That's how guests are treated, isn't it?"

Carol looked at her a bit belligerently. "Is that a derogatory remark disguised as a question?" she asked, leading the way from the dining room. "Are you suggesting that I don't know how to treat guests?"

Alma's reply was delivered just as she left the dining room, with the result that Mike was unable to hear it. When the two women had gone, he sat for a second, looking glum, then he rose and trailed after them, interested in finding out how the experiment was progressing.

When Mike reached the entrance to the recreation room he saw that Alma had got Carol to stretch out on the couch. She was now propping her up, stuffing pillows under her head and shoulders.

"I'm not so sure I need rest," Carol said. "It's morning —I just finished sleeping all night."

Alma shoved an open book into her hands. "You're not

resting," she told her. "You're relaxing, and, at the same time, improving your mind."

Carol looked at the pages of the book. "Improving my mind, but not much," she said. "The book is upside down."

Alma turned it over.

"Still not much," Carol said. "This is somebody's old third grade reader."

Alma took the book from her hands and replaced it with another.

"Better," Carol said. "*How to Stalk the Wily Labrador Musk Ox for Fun & Profit!*"

"Say, that sounds interesting," Mike said, starting to enter the room. "Let me—"

"Oh, no!" Alma said, charging and pushing him out of the room. "This is Carol's time to be alone and really relax. Besides, remember, Carol is me. And I'm Carol. So your responsibility is to me—Carol—not to her—Alma. And I need your help right now."

"Wait a minute!" Carol protested, sitting up. "Yesterday, he spent the whole time with the guest—me. That is, I mean, you." She lay back. "If I keep that up, I really will need a rest," she said.

"Read!" Alma ordered, speaking to Carol, while, at the same time, leading Mike off toward another part of the house.

When they had gone, Carol sighed defeatedly, then raised the book, which was not actually about stalking the wily musk ox, but a psychological study of a captain in the U.S. Army who had spent the whole of World War I in a recruiting booth in Nutley, New Jersey, thereby acquiring a delusion that he was being kept prisoner inside

a mammoth box by a great pointing finger. After ploughing through the preface, she found herself becoming drowsy. Afraid that if she fell asleep Alma might sell the couch as used furniture—and her along with it—she got up and began pacing the recreation room, determined to stay awake.

Pacing did not help Carol to relax any more than reading had. Intuition told her that something that would not be to her liking if she knew about it was going on. The house was too quiet. Sounds were coming from the kitchen every now and then, but they were familiar, not the sounds that a stranger—Alma, for instance—would make. And what did Alma have Mike doing?

Carol moved to the recreation room entranceway and peeked out. There was no one in sight. She cleared her throat. There was no response. She hummed; nobody appeared. She whistled.

Tiger, the dog, came ambling into view.

"Not you!" Carol said to him. She turned him around and sent him ambling back toward wherever he had come from.

"What am I doing?" she said sharply to herself. "I'm peeking around like a sneak thief! This is my own house, isn't it?" She shook her head. "No, it isn't. It's *her* house. I'm the guest." She sighed drearily and headed back toward the couch.

A moment later, Alice called, "Hey!" from the entrance-way.

Carol jumped, startled. Then, turning and seeing a friendly face, she broke into a grin. "Hey, yourself," she said. "Just passing by? Come on in. Let's visit."

"Who has time?" Alice replied. "I've got all that cotton to pick."

Looking puzzled, Carol walked back toward her. "Cotton? Pick?"

"Isn't that what the cotton pickin' slaves do?" Alice asked.

"Alice, you're not being too clear. . . ."

"Well, before Alma and Mike took off—"

"Off!"

"Alma talked him into taking her shopping," Alice explained. "And she left me with the cooking, ironing, washing, and dusting to do. Not to mention the bed-making, window cleaning, menu-planning and children-watching."

"But she's supposed to be doing some of that," Carol protested.

Alice shook her head. "Alma's idea of taking care of the house and children is to tell me to do it all."

Carol frowned thoughtfully. "Now, why didn't I think of that?"

"Don't expect any answer from me," Alice replied, turning and departing. "Anybody who's dumb enough to do all those things I just mentioned has no business giving an opinion on anything."

Carol watched Alice leave, then she plodded back toward the couch. When she reached it, she picked up the book that Alma had forced on her and started to hurl it at a cushion. But just then the sound of a sudden racket came from the direction of the kitchen, and Carol, alarmed, tossed the book straight up into the air and dived for the cushion herself. Grabbing it, she wrapped it around her head—in particular, her ears—trying to shut out the

sound. But the pillow, as a buffer, had almost no effect at all. The crashing, banging, rattling, whanging, keening, clanging and wailing got through to Carol's ears. It took her only seconds to realize that The Numbers Racket was at it again . . . somewhere in the house, probably the kitchen. Mike evidently had neglected to tell the group that the inside of the house was now out-of-bounds.

Intending to do Mike's duty for him, Carol pulled her head free of the cushion, and, not unlike the U.S. Cavalry of old, galloped toward the scene of suspected mayhem. She did not quite get to the kitchen, however. Reaching the foyer, she discovered that Aunt Zel's antiques were doing dances again on the shelves. A vase was bugalooing toward the edge. A mug had frugged itself all the way to the end of a shelf and was about to topple over. Frantic, Carol raced toward them. She snatched the mug, which had fallen, from sure disaster. After placing it back on the shelf and pushing all the other antiques back toward the wall, she started for the kitchen once more.

But as she was about to clear the foyer, she caught a glimpse of the shelves in the living room. There, in perfect rhythm with the rock, the antique vases, plates, mugs, bowls and cups were out-frugging and out-bugalooing even the antiques in the foyer. As many as a half-dozen were on the verge of taking a dive all at once. With a shriek of sheer outrage, Carol dashed to the rescue. Arriving at the shelves, she caught one, two, three antiques in two hands, put two of them back in place, caught two more with the free hand, set the first one back on the shelf, bagged two more with that hand, then with two

hands returned what was left of the entire catch. Meanwhile, a cup had been making its way south and had reached a point where she could not possibly reach it before it toppled from where it was—balancing on the edge.

Carol threw up her hands. "I'm only human," she advised the cup, thereby informing it that it was on its own.

The cup teetered.

"Fall," Carol challenged it. "If I tried to catch you—where you are, and where I am—I'd only break a leg in the attempt."

The cup continued to keep the precarious balance.

"You're taunting me," Carol told it. "I know *exactly* what will happen. I'm an old Three Stooges watcher from 'way back. I'll grab for you, and, whomp, down you'll go. Just as I get my fingers on you, you'll splatter."

The cup rocked back and forth.

"Besides," Carol told it, "I'm getting a lit-tle tired of being put-upon. Aunt Zel brought you in here without so much as a by-your-leave and had that knife-chewing wrestler stick you around on all the shelves, and if you all fall and break it'll serve her right. Go on, go on —fall!"

The cup lost its equilibrium and hurtled straight down.

"No! I didn't mean it!" Carol cried diving to save it.

But, whomp, down it went, and, just as she got her fingers on it, it splattered.

"I'm sorry!" Carol told the pieces. "I didn't think you believed me!"

From the cup, there was no response.

Carol leaped to her feet. She began grabbing antiques from the shelves as fast as she could and placing them on

the floor where, momentarily, they were safe. When she had cleared all the shelves in the living room, she raced back to the foyer. There, she repeated the process. Finished, she dashed toward the rear entrance. She noticed as she was darting through the corridor, though, that she was passing the kitchen, and not so incidentally, The Numbers Racket, the source of her vexation. Thinking quickly, Carol stuck out a hand, got a hold on a door frame, yanked herself to an abrupt halt, then reversed her field and galloped back to the kitchen.

In the kitchen doorway, she paused for a split second, long enough to identify the members of the musical group as the five Watts boys and the oldest Brady girl, then let out a whoop that rattled every plate, dish, bowl, cup and saucer in the kitchen, and—miracle of miracles—even got the attention of the musicians.

"Mother!" Marcia said indignantly as the music faded.

"Mother?" Carol replied, matching her daughter's indignation—and then some. "Is that all you can say? Mother? Cups! Vases! Bowls! And you say: Mother!"

Marcia now looked bewildered. "What's—"

"What's?" Carol erupted. "Plates! Mugs! And you can look me straight in the face and say: What's? My own daughter?" She pointed an outraged and trembling finger at the Watts boys. "Them, I can understand! This is their whole way of life! Destruction! They've probably left a path a mile wide of broken cups and plates and mugs and saucers all the way from Rome to Paris to Liverpool to West Wagonfork Falls, Ontario! But you! My own precious daughter!"

"This is only a guess," Two said to Ein, "but maybe that's a lyric." He turned to Marcia. "Is your mother a song plugger?"

"Lyric!" Carol said. "Song plugger!"

"Mother," Marcia said pleadingly, "I'm kind of getting the idea that you're angry about something. Could you tell us what it is?"

"Angry?" Carol replied. "My own daughter, and she—" Carol interrupted herself. She had suddenly realized that Marcia and the boys probably did not know why she was so irate. She sagged and looked at Marcia and the Watts boys a little sheepishly. "Ahhhh . . . you're probably wondering why I'm here. . . ." she murmured. "You see . . . well, your music . . . and then the antiques . . . they sort of. . . ." She straightened and stiffened. "The fact is, rock and antiques are not compatible. When you rock, they jump. Up and down. And shimmy. Straight for the edges of the shelves." With a hand, she pantomimed a plunging dive. "Splat!" she said.

"You mean the music shakes the antiques off the shelves, Mother?" Marcia said.

Carol nodded. "It must be wonderful to be able to express yourself like that," she said.

"Well, we're sorry," Marcia said.

"We didn't know," Two told Carol. "Antiques could be dropping all over the place while we're playing and we wouldn't hear it."

"Antiques?" Carol said. "*Bombs* could be dropping!"

Two nodded. "That's the kind of music it is," he said.

"From now on, just play it outside," Carol told them. "Do you have any idea what those antiques are worth?"

"I guess I can guess," Marcia said, looking deeply hurt. "They're worth more than a certain person's career as an artist—you made *that* pretty clear."

Carol blinked at her, taken completely by surprise. "Honey, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Marcia told her. "I don't mind playing second canary to a bunch of old cups and saucers. I guess it's a good thing this happened. Now I know my true value—as a member of this family, that is."

"Marcia, if you'll just—"

"All somebody has to do is bring some old dishes into the house and all of a sudden the people with seniority don't count for anything," Marcia went on.

"It's true—you were here first. But—"

"Mrs. Brady, there's no reason to get all uptight about this," Two said. "We'll just stay out in the trailer from now on. It's okay." He motioned to the others. "Let's skip."

"No, no, no—no skipping!" Carol said, panicking. "The antiques! They'll—"

"Mother, he didn't mean he intended to really skip," Marcia told her. "Let's skip just means 'Let's go,' that's all."

"Oh. All right." She fluttered a hand at the boys, smiling feebly. "Bye-bye."

Out they went, Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro, Cinq and Marcia.

"One too many!" Carol called out. "Marcia . . . come back!"

Her daughter apparently did not hear.

Once more, Carol sagged. "Boy, they're right," she said,

addressing herself again. "I come in here whooping and ranting, mad at them, and nobody had told them not to do what I was mad at them for doing. What were they doing that was so terrible? A little noise. They didn't even *know* it was noise. They thought it was music. Beautiful music. I had the gall—the *gall*—to whoop at them for making beautiful music." She shuddered. "It must be terrible to be a kid. You know what I'd give me if I were a kid? She doubled up a hand, turning it into a fist. "Right in the kisser!"

Grumbling, Carol made her way back toward the foyer. "Who gets priority, anyway?" she asked herself. "Antiques or kids?" Then she spoke sternly to herself. "Don't answer that," she warned. "This conversation is heading in the wrong direction. A couple minutes more and you'll be telling Marcia she can go on the road with those rackety numbers, and, simultaneously and at the same time, you'll be throwing antiques out of here by the shovelful."

Having reached the foyer, Carol stopped and began putting the antiques she had placed on the floor for safety back on the shelves. "That cup in the living room that fell," she said to herself. "I wonder if I can glue it back together. Nah! My conscience wouldn't let me keep the secret, anyway, so why bother."

When she had placed all the antiques in the foyer back on the shelves, she proceeded to the living room. There, she began picking up the antiques that she had placed for temporary safekeeping on the floor. With a plate in one hand and a bowl in the other, she stood looking down sadly at the pieces of broken cup.

"My Queen Anne!" the voice of Aunt Zel intoned woefully from the living room entranceway.

Carol winced almost to the point of shriveling, then looked toward the sound. Aunt Zel was in the doorway, looking, not so surprisingly, as if she had just discovered that her Queen Anne cup was broken. Greg was standing a step behind her. He, too, looked as if he had come upon a tragedy by mistake.

Once again, Carol looked down at the pieces of cup. She realized what Aunt Zel was probably thinking. There was Carol, an antique in each hand, other antiques resting on the floor, and the shattered Queen Anne cup at her feet.

"No," Carol said, turning, shaking her head, "it didn't quite happen the way you're thinking it happened. Now, think back—remember the racket?"

"What racket?" Aunt Zel asked sharply.

"The noise . . . I mean music . . . playing . . . five Watts and a Brady . . . The Numbers Racket, I mean. You heard them. How could you not hear them?"

"Psssst!" Greg called. "She was napping. With—"

"—plugs in her ears," Carol nodded. "Of course. Naturally. On a day like today, isn't that the way it would be? I'm not surprised. Did anybody think I'd be surprised?" She shook her head. "I'm not surprised."

Aunt Zel advanced, still glaring. "My second baby . . . deceased!" she wept. Reaching Carol's vicinity, she knelt and began collecting the pieces.

Carol addressed a plea to Greg. "Tell her it's not my fault," she begged. "There was music. The antiques started dancing. No, no, that sounds ridiculous. But it's true. Danc-

ing! Up and down on the shelves. I ran here, I ran there. Catching. Snaring. Snatching. I played this living room like a star left fielder. But then—" She pointed. "Right there! Queen Anne. She was teetering. I dived. Splat!"

"Was that you or Queen Anne—splat?" Greg asked.

"The cup. I don't go splat. I go more like splomp!"

Aunt Zel was rising, the pieces of cup cradled in her hands. "Gregory!" she said. Then she turned and headed for the exit.

"I'll go with her and try to explain it," Greg said to Carol. "See if you can get me off with life!" Carol begged.

A moment later, Aunt Zel and Greg were gone.

Beat and bent, Carol picked up the rest of the antiques and placed them back on the shelves. Then she went back to the recreation room. As she was about to stretch out on the couch again, she heard the sound of Alma Watts approaching. Alma was giggling to someone. A second later, she burst into the room, followed by Mike, who was looking slightly dazed. Mike's arms were wrapped around a load of packages.

"I knew it was fabulous!" Alma gushed, addressing Carol. "But I didn't realize *how* fabulous it was. Carol, you lead a *fabulous* life!'"

"I look it," Carol said, admiring the stunning clothes Alma was wearing. "How do I do it? I thought I forgot to take enough money when I left my bum of a husband."

"Charge," Alma replied. "Why I didn't think of that before, I don't know. It just didn't occur to me. I knew that show business people charge everything, of course. I always did. But it just never entered my mind that housewives did it too. Fabulous!"

"Well—"

Alma had taken a package from the collection in Mike's arms. "Just *wait* 'til you see these!" she said to Carol. "They fit my new identity like a T." She pulled an item from the package and held it up. "Like it? It's a leisure apron!"

Carol looked blank. "Leisure apron," she said, repeating.

"You wear it while the maid is getting dinner," Alma explained. "Isn't it—"

"—fabulous!" Carol agreed.

Alma looked at her a little concernedly. "Carol, you seem paler . . . even . . . older . . . What have you been doing?"

"Aging," Carol replied. She tipped backwards and, like a board, landed flat on the couch. "I'm on my way," she said, raising her eyes heavenward. "Just wrap me in my leisure apron so they'll know it's me."

6

As Carol was telling Mike and Alma what had happened while they were gone, Greg appeared. He stood listening to Carol's story, looking sympathetic. But when she finished, his only response to it was to address his father, telling him that Aunt Zel wanted to speak to him in private.

"Boy, I sure made an impression on you," Carol said to Greg.

"I'm practicing blasé," he told her. "If you're going to be sophisticated, first you have to be blasé."

"Honey, blasé is all right for French movie stars," Carol told him. "But not for a crackerjack softball shortstop. All the grounders will go right through your legs."

Greg smiled thinly. "Shall I tell Aunt Zel you have time for her now?" he asked his father.

"All right," Mike replied. "I'll be in my office in a minute. We can talk there."

Greg smiled a plasticlike smile, taking in all the adults, then departed.

"He reminds me a little of my own children," Alma said. "He's very little trouble, I'll bet. My own children are no trouble at all. I never know they're around except when they're playing their music."

Mike and Carol looked at each other, mirroring each other's unhappiness.

"I liked him better when he was some trouble," Carol said.

Mike nodded. "He's like a little robot these days—trotting here, trotting there, either at Aunt Zel's heels or delivering messages for her."

"Yes, isn't that wonderful!" Alma gushed.

"Well . . . I'll talk to her," Mike said, leaving. "Maybe she wants to tell me she's moving on." His unhappiness began to subside. He halted and turned back, facing Carol. "Maybe when you dropped that cup . . . maybe that did it," he said, grinning.

"Oh, I *hope* so!" Carol replied. "I'm sorry about the cup. Although, it wasn't my fault that it broke. But I'd like to get things back to normal."

"But things are *marvelous*," Alma said. "What do you housewives and mothers want, anyway? You sleep 'til noon, you spend the afternoon shopping—"

Mike interrupted. "I'll let you know as soon as possible how the talk comes out," he said to Carol, moving toward the exit once more.

"Not if it's bad news!" Carol called after him.

Mike reached the doorway to his home office just as Aunt Zel and Greg were arriving. Aunt Zel patted Greg on the head affectionately and asked him to wait outside while she conferred with his father. Then she and Mike entered the office and Mike closed the door.

"I have something to say, Michael, that I think will please you," Aunt Zel said, seating herself in an overstuffed chair.

"Well . . . I know you have a lot of territory to cover, a lot of people to see," Mike smiled. "We'll miss you, but—"

"I don't understand."

"Mmmmmm . . . maybe I was leaping to the wrong conclusion," Mike said. "What is it you want to tell me that will please me?"

"I simply wanted to say that, basically, you've done an excellent job with Greg. In molding him, I mean. I find him . . . well, let me put it this way. His potential, as I see it, is almost limitless."

Mike was surprised; plesantly surprised, but surprised, nevertheless. He had always looked upon Greg as being brighter than average, but . . . but limitless pontential? Well . . . maybe. . . . It was a little early, he thought, to determine that. "He *does* play great shortstop," Mike replied.

Aunt Zel peered at him blankly. "Pardon?"

"Shortstop. That's a position. In a game. Baseball."

"Oh . . . yesssss. . . . Well, that can be trained out of him, I'm sure," Aunt Zel said confidently. "I didn't say

—and I didn't mean to indicate—that he has no flaws. But the imperfections, few as they are, appear to be minor, and I'm sure they can be eradicated quite easily. Now then, to business. I assume you want the best for Greg."

Mike thought for a moment, then replied, "I suppose so. Different people, though, have different ideas about what the best is."

Aunt Zel chuckled. "How true. Very astute of you, my boy. I find it very amusing what other people think of as the best. But, of course, we can't cater to their ignorance, can we? Why, that would be no better than reverting to savagery, to basic instinct, to barbarism."

"Ahhhh—" Mike began. He could not go on.

"Certainly, that is not something we want for Greg," Aunt Zel continued. "That's why I'm suggesting—and perhaps this will come as no surprise to you—why I'm suggesting that Greg be allowed to live with me for a few years. I don't want to be more definite about it than that —more definite, that is, than 'a few years'—because, of course, none of us really know's for certain how it will all work out. Do we?"

Mike, who had *not* guessed what Aunt Zel was going to suggest, shook his head dumbly.

"It's possible that I've judged wrong," Aunt Zel went on. "The potential that I see now, may not, in fact, be there. He might prove to be nothing more than another ordinary person. Not all of us, after all, can love antiques."

Mike tried earnestly to figure out the connection between superiority and loving antiques, but it eluded him.

"You don't mean," he said, "you want to turn him into an antique . . . ah . . . fancier."

Aunt Zel chuckled again. "Exclusively? Heavens, no! The person who dotes on antiques exclusively, dear boy, is not a whole person. One must appreciate, too, the humming bird egg a la Ohoho, and the infant bamboo shoot and the shaved almond."

"You're probably right," Mike nodded. "Bearded almonds are about the worst—"

"I wonder, Michael, if you're taking my suggestion as seriously as you might? Greg's interests should be considered, you know. Think what I can offer him. An education in the very best schools. Introduction to the most important people. Travel—an intimate view of exotic lands, exciting places, fascinating people."

"But, in the end—"

"Yes, you're right," Aunt Zel said, "That's the best of all arguments for my proposal. In the end, if the potential is truly there, he can be *just like me!*" She beamed joyously, completely delighted by the notion.

"A perfect copy," Mike said drearily.

"In contrast, we have to consider what he has here," Aunt Zel said. "He's getting a public school education, I assume."

"Yes."

"Mingling with the . . . the . . . the—"

"A lot of them," Mike admitted.

"And seeing *what* exotic lands?"

"Well . . . there was a Japanese trade exhibition in the city not long ago."

"And seeing what exciting places?"

"We haven't exactly got there yet, but we have our sights set on the Grand Canyon."

"What important people?"

"Well, let's see," Mike replied, thinking hard. "Oh! Sure! He knows a kid who knows a kid who amost got the autograph of every player on the Angels."

"Angels? That's. . . ."

"A baseball team—more or less."

"I see," Aunt Zel replied. "Evidently you're still refusing to take my suggestion seriously. I wonder if Greg would react in the same way."

Mike looked uncomfortable. "Have you mentioned it to him?"

"No. I wanted to discuss it with you first," Aunt Zel answered. "I would not, of course, make the proposal directly to him—not without your permission. It's your duty, Michael, to offer him the opportunity."

"I guess so," Mike replied. "I'll tell you frankly, though, Aunt Zel, he wouldn't be interested. Oh, he might be excited about the idea for a few moments . . . or a few hours . . . even a few days. . . . But he'd quickly get over it. He goes through these phases. All children do. But, after he thought about it a little more, he'd decide he likes it here."

"In other words, you're making the decision for him."

"No, no, no," Mike replied. "You don't understand. I'm only telling you how he would decide if I gave him the choice."

"You're absolutely positive of that?"

"One hundred percent."

"Well then, in that case, you wouldn't hesitate to offer him the opportunity and allow him to, actually, make the decision himself."

"I wouldn't hesitate for a second."

"Then do it."

"There's no need for that," Mike assured her. "I *know* my son. I know exactly how he'd decide."

"Yet, you refuse to give him the opportunity?"

"It's not that I'm refusing to—" Mike realized how he probably sounded to Aunt Zel. He made vague motions with his hands, then faced away from her, thinking. He admitted to himself that he was not being completely candid. He was not entirely certain that Greg would elect to stay with the family rather than go with Aunt Zel. After all, what Aunt Zel was offering probably *sounded* a great deal more attractive than what Greg had. "I'll think about it a while more," Mike said, subdued. "I want to discuss it with Carol, too. A thing like this. . . ."

"I understand," Aunt Zel smiled. "I know how attached one can get to one's children. I have babies, too, don't forget."

"That's not exactly—"

"Still, in the final analysis, one must do what one must do," Aunt Zel went on. "One must do what is, in the long run, the best for the child. And to keep Greg here in this . . . this . . . when he has such potential—"

"California," Mike said defensively, "is not exactly a wilderness."

"Yes, I realize that, culturally, it hasn't yet reached that stage." Aunt Zel nodded. "That's why it's so important to get Greg out. One decays, you know, in an atmosphere of—"

"Okay," Mike broke in. "As I said, I'll think about it, and I'll discuss it with Carol."

"And when, dear boy, will you discuss it with Greg?"

"Oh." He made indefinite circles with his hands. "In . . . uh . . . in time."

"Shortly?"

"Well, you know how these things go. . . ."

"I won't be able to stay with you much longer, Michael."

"I could always write you and tell you why he decided to stay here."

Aunt Zel looked at him coolly. "In other words, you don't really intend to offer him the opportunity."

"I didn't say that," Mike replied crossly. "I'll . . . well, sometime before you leave . . . I'll talk to him about it."

Aunt Zel smiled once more. "That is *all* I ask," she said. "I'm quite confident of the outcome." She rose and moved toward the doorway. "You'll miss him for a while, I'm sure," she said. "But think how proud you'll be of him after he's made the transition from what he is to what he'll be."

Mike nodded. "I wouldn't be losing a son, I'd be gaining a jet-setter."

"How well put," Aunt Zel said, opening the door. She started out through the doorway, then halted and faced Mike once more. "It nearly slipped my mind," she said. "The maharajah is in the city. On business, of course. He is either purchasing or selling some portion of the town —I'm never sure of the details. But, be that as it may, he has asked me to join him in his suite for lunch tomorrow. I wonder if I might take Greg with me?"

"He might be tied up," Mike replied. "Greg really lives a busy, exciting life—for a boy."

"It's not a problem of whether Greg will be free. What I require is your permission."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . well. . . ." He shrugged. "Why not? He'll probably—" Mike looked a little ill. "—enjoy it."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," Aunt Zel said, turning and departing.

Mike watched her go, glowering. "And may your humming bird egg over-steam," he muttered.

In the trailer, Marcia was pacing up and down, occasionally tripping on the lower edge of the poncho she had draped around her. It was clear that she was working up a good rage. The Watts boys—Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro and Cinq—observed her, watching without indicating any interest. Ohoho was present, too. He was seated just inside the trailer doorway, facing the house, ready to run if Aunt Zel should summon him.

Marcia, who had been pacing silently, finally spoke. "It's an open-and-shut case of violation," she announced, halting, addressing the Watts boys. "Any argument?"

As one, they shook their heads.

"A violation of my right to have my friends in what is my part of the house," Marcia said. "Now, I agree that, technically, the kitchen is not *my* part of the house. But then, what part is?"

Ein exhaled, but otherwise there was no response.

"See what I'm getting at?" Marcia persisted. "I don't actually have a part of the house that I can call my own. Oh, there's my room, but I share that. The others have

their rooms, too, and yet they have private places in the rest of the house that are all theirs. Mike does, anyway. And if Mike does, why shouldn't we all? I mean, is that fair? For him to have his private office in the house where he can go and get away from us, but none of the rest of us can have a private place where we can go to get away from the rest of us?"

Two yawned.

Ohoho spoke up, however. "You one sproiled blat," he said to Marcia, keeping his eyes on the house.

"You're an adult, I don't expect you to understand," Marcia replied. She addressed the Watts boys once more. "But *you* understand, don't you?" she asked.

Ein, who was about to drop off to sleep, forced his eyes open.

"Maybe if I explain it a little further, you'll understand," Marcia said. "I mean, the whole house belongs to all of us, doesn't it? We're all one family, aren't we? So, part of it is mine—mine for my very own—isn't it? Okay, then. So, since I don't have a private place that I can call my own—the way Mike does—then you might say that wherever I happen to be is my private place. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

"You need good splanking," Ohoho grumbled.

Marcia turned to him. "There's no 'r' in spanking," she said. "So why do you replace it with an 'l'?"

"Got to thlow one of those in every sentance," he replied. "Got to kleep up image."

"Oh." Marcia turned back to the boys. "So, if it so happens that I am in the kitchen, then the kitchen, at that precise moment, is my private place—right?" she said. "And

how dare my mother throw me and my friends out of there? Out of my very own private place? How dare? Answer me that?"

"You a dring-a-ring," Ohoho muttered.

Otherwise there was silence.

"Doesn't anybody else even want to *try* to answer?" Marcia pleaded.

Her desperation finally evoked a reaction. Cuatro shook his head. At least, he appeared to be shaking it. Marcia was not completely certain. The thought occurred to Marcia that he simply might be having trouble balancing it on his neck, and that, instead of shaking it, he was actually bobbling it, trying to keep it from toppling off.

"I don't know," Marcia said, baffled. "How come nobody else is worked up about this the way I am? She threw us *all* out of the house. Not just me. Oh, sure, it was my private place she tossed us out of, and I have a right to be more upset about it than the rest of you. But . . . but . . . you at least ought to be helping me be indignant, shouldn't you? What are friends for?"

"You ought to be rocked up in your loom!" Ohoho told her, still not looking at her.

She ignored him, addressing the boys, especially Ein, again. "Could somebody explain it? Don't you even care? Not even a little bit?"

At last, Ein spoke. "Wouldn't be cool, man," he told her.

"Oh, sure, I know that," Marcia replied. "But you can't be cool all the time, can you? What about when your rights have been violated?"

Two spoke up. "When you're cool and your rights are

violated, you protest," he said. "What Ein meant about what you want not being cool, he meant it's not super cool."

"Oh. Why didn't he say so?"

"To say so, that wouldn't be super cool, man. Anybody super cool, you won't ever hear him *say* he's super cool. Saying it, that's square. You're only super cool if you know enough not to say you're super cool."

"Got it," Marcia nodded, squinting hard. She sighed. "Gee, it isn't easy, is it? I try not to care about anything, but I keep forgetting. Is there some secret to it?"

Two shook his head. "It's easy. All you need is to have no roots."

"Pardon?"

"Like us," Two explained. "For an example, what would it get us to get all uptight about your mother giving us the heave-ho out of the kitchen? The bronze good guy medal?"

"You don't do it to get anything for doing it," Marcia replied. "You do it because that's what it does to you, it gets you uptight."

Cuatro clapped his hands.

"What did that mean?" Marcia asked him.

Two answered. "Nothing," he told her.

"Then why did he do it?"

"He felt like it."

"Oh. Okay. I'm all in favor of that," Marcia said. "If you feel like it, do it. That's human nature. But, getting back to what I was saying, you stand up for your rights because— Well, because they're your rights. And, if you

don't, whoever violated them the first time will violate them again probably."

"Not if you're not around," Two told her.

"How do you mean that exactly?"

"Well, if you're standing around in this town, say," Two replied, "and somebody, say, tells you to get off the sidewalk, and it's a public sidewalk, that's a violation of your rights, say—right? Whoever did it can't do it again, though if you get out of town. Take off. Fly. Disappear. Move on to the next town, that's all. No strain."

Marcia was shaking her head. "What's going to happen is, when you get to the next town, somebody there is going to tell you to get off the sidewalk. What are you going to do then? Move on? Again? And when you get to the next town, move on again? You can't just keep that up."

"Why not?" Two asked.

"From town to town to town to town? What kind of a life is that?"

"That's our life," Ein said, finally speaking. "When you go on the road with us, bird, it'll be your life."

"Gee . . . that's right."

"So you better learn not to care if you really want to go on the road," Two told her. "It's not so hard to do. It's easy."

"It just comes to you after a while," Cuatro said to Marcia. "You don't get to know anybody much, and nobody gets to know you much. There isn't any place where you think of when somebody says 'home.' No place that you claim, and no place that claims you."

"No matter where you are," Two said, "you know you'll be somewhere else before long. So, it's easy not to care. What would be hard, I guess, would be to care . . . to really care. . . . You never get to know a place."

Again, Ein spoke. "Remember what I told you?" he said to Marcia. "Getting involved, getting uptight, most all of the squares do it. So, do it and you're conforming. The only way to be completely yourself is to do nothing. Zero."

Marcia nodded. "I think I understand it now," she said. "It's going to take some working on, but I think I can do it."

"If you work at it, you're not doing it," Two said.

"Darn!" Marcia said, angry at herself. "I keep forgetting. Anything I do is wrong. Because doing is wrong—it's getting involved. So, what I have to do is nothing. But I can't work at doing nothing. I have to let it come naturally." She sighed wearily, "It isn't easy."

After Aunt Zel had left his office, Mike went to the recreation room. To his surprise, he found that Carol was there without Alma.

"Where?" he asked, thinking that Alma might be lurking somewhere nearby and not wanting her to know that he was available again.

"It's all right," Carol whispered. Then she raised her voice to normal. "What am I whispering about? This is my own house, isn't it?" She put a hand over her eyes. "Maybe it isn't my own house. It doesn't *seem* like my own house. Where am I?"

"Uncover your eyes," Mike said, sitting down in a chair that faced the couch.

Carol peeked out from under her hand. "I can *see* that it's my own house, but I still don't believe it."

"It's only temporary . . . this . . . this . . ." Mike said.

"You keep telling me that. When I'm old and gray, I have a feeling, you'll still be telling me that."

Mike looked around the room, then toward the exit. "Where is she?" he asked.

"She went looking for a mirror—a full-length mirror. She wants to try on all her leisure aprons. Why? Haven't you been with her long enough for one day? Are you—"

"Don't start that," Mike warned. "I have problems enough."

Carol studied him a second, then leaned forward. "You really are bothered about something, aren't you?" she said. "What happened? One of the children? What?"

Mike told her about his conversation with Aunt Zel.

"And *that* bothers you?" she said. "It's so ridiculous, I don't know why you're not laughing."

"When Marcia told you she intended to go on the road, why didn't you laugh?"

"That's different," Carol replied. "Marcia is just a. . . . And then, another thing, she doesn't. . . . Well, I didn't feel like laughing, that's why. But I didn't get all bothered about it. I just took care of it, that's all. Sometimes you make things too complicated, Mike."

"Think back," he said. "*How* did you take care of it?"

"I turned it over to you."

"All right, that's what I'll do with my problem," Mike said. "I'll turn it over—"

"Never mind," Carol interrupted. "It works for me, but I don't think it would work for you. You did the right thing in the first place—when you got bothered about it, I mean." She pondered for a second. Then she said, "You don't for a minute think Greg wants to go with her, do you?"

"Well, basically . . ."

"That's bad," Carol said. "When you start out with 'Well, basically,' that means you're hedging. But, think about it. Why would he want to go with her? Just because, as she says, she can offer him the best education he could ever get, and the chance to meet exciting—" She was nodding. "As I said—you were right to get bothered."

"I don't think, at his age, he can really evaluate these things," Mike said. "What she has to offer sounds awfully exciting, of course, but, on the other hand, here, he would have, oh, the companionship of the family, and, uh, his friends, and— Of course, he could make new friends."

"And with all Aunt Zel's money, he could probably buy himself a new family if he wanted it," Carol said.

"There's that to consider," Mike replied.

"Buying a new family? Come on . . . I was kidding."

"I was referring to what you said about him having all of Aunt Zel's money," Mike explained. "Aunt Zel is getting on in years. And, unless she knows someone higher-up than the kings, queens and dukes she's mentioned so far, she is going to die some day."

"How higher-up?" Carol asked, puzzled.

Mike pointed heavenward.

"Oh. *That* higher-up." She shook her head. "I'm sure she would have mentioned it if she knew anyone that high up."

"It seems likely that if Greg went with her," Mike continued, "he would eventually become her heir."

Carol put her hands to her cheeks. "*All that money!*"

"Right."

"But you wouldn't let that influence you, would you?" she said. "You wouldn't send Greg with her just because he *might* someday inherit her fortune. 'Might' is sort of chancy. Of course, if you could get it in writing. . . ." Carol clapped a hand to her mouth. After a second, she took it away. "What am I saying? I sound like a conniving— You wouldn't do it, though, would you, Mike? Not for that reason. That would be like . . . like selling Greg!"

"Of course I wouldn't do it for that reason," Mike replied crossly. "What I'm thinking about is years from now, when Aunt Zel does die. If we keep Greg here, will he then wish that we'd let him go?"

"Because if we had he'd be inheriting the money probably?"

"Yes."

"I'll clobber him."

"No, you won't," Mike said. "I wouldn't either. What we'll both do—if it ever happens—is wonder where we failed. We'll blame ourselves for the fact that he thinks more of money than he does of us. Perhaps we'll be wrong in blaming ourselves. But, on the other hand, maybe we'll be right. After all, considering. . . ."

"Yes? What?"

"Well . . . Aunt Zel more or less challenged me to let Greg make the decision in this matter. And . . . I hesitated. I'm still hesitating. I'm not sure what he would decide."

"Why, Mike, he would no more decide to go with Aunt Zel than . . . than. . . ."

"See? You're not sure either."

"He's been acting very strange lately," Carol said. "He might do anything in his present condition. You know what I think we ought to do? I think we ought to hide him for a few weeks. We could put him in a closet. No, no, not a closet—she'd look in the closet. There I go! Every once in a while I sound like a mad woman! Mike, we've got to do something." She suddenly stood up. "I know what let's do! Let's clear the house. We've had Aunt Zel and Ohoho and Alma Watts and her brood around here long enough. This is supposed to be our vacation! We'll tell them we all have chicken pox and they better get out before they catch it!"

"You sound like a mad woman again."

"If it gets rid of them and solves all our problems, why not?"

"It wouldn't solve all the problems," Mike replied glumly. "Evicting Aunt Zel wouldn't tell me what I want to know about Greg . . . about our relationship with him, that is. I would still wonder: if I had let him make the decision, what would he have decided?"

"I'll tell you what your real problem is," Carol said. "It's not Aunt Zel and it's not Greg and it's not your

doubts. Your real problem is that you're too honorable! So there! I've said it!"

"I'm sorry," Mike said.

"Boy, I'm not." Carol told him. She kissed him on the tip of the nose. "That's one of the big reasons I have for loving you."

7

Before having a serious talk with Greg about Aunt Zel's proposal, Mike decided to have a casual, buddy-buddy talk with him and sound him out on his ideas in general on life as Aunt Zel lived it. He went to the boys' room looking for Greg and found him getting ready to leave for the city, where he and Aunt Zel were to have lunch with the maharajah. Greg was involved in the complicated project of combing his hair.

"Well, pretty exciting, eh?" Mike said, smiling, sitting down on the edge of one of the beds.

"I'm still practicing my blasé," Greg replied, remaining calm. "Inside, though, I'm pretty excited, all right."

"I don't blame you," Mike said. "You don't meet many maharajahs these days. Of course, uh, maharajahs are not as big as they used to be." He looked at Greg specula-

tively. "There are a lot of people who would tell you that maharajahs are fairly small potatoes."

Greg looked back over his shoulder at him. "Small potatoes? Is that one of those Gay Nineties expressions, Dad?"

"Gay Nineties? Look, I may not still be in rompers, but I'm not Methuselah, either."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Greg said. "I didn't mean it that way. I was just interested in the expression—small potatoes. The young people in Aunt Zel's set use a lot of those old-timey expressions, I understand. I thought it might be a good idea to have a few handy—in case I ever met any of them, you know."

"Oh . . . well, yes, I— Well, anyway, as I was saying," Mike went on, "maharajahs, most of them, are relatively unimportant these days."

"I know. Except for a very few," Greg replied, returning to the project of combing his hair. "The maharajah of Jolipur, Aunt Zel's friend, is one of them. He's sort of an international banker. He midwifed that merger between Sahara Oil and Nasturtium Shipping Lines last month, for instance. You remember that, I suppose."

"Ahhh . . . midwifed . . . oh, sure, yes, how could I forget that?"

"Midwifed means he was the middleman," Greg said. "We use that term in business a lot."

"We?"

"International bankers," Greg replied, patting his hair on top to try to flatten it so that the part would not be visible.

"Greg, is there something you haven't told me? I didn't know you were an international banker."

Greg looked back at him again. "I didn't mean that in that way, Dad," he said. "When I said 'We,' I meant the people in our crowd—you know, maharajahs and royalty and tycoons and international bankers."

"How do you fit in there?" Mike asked.

"Family connections," Greg replied. "Aunt Zel is in, and I'm her . . . well, sort-of-nephew-once-removed or something . . . so . . . you know. . . ." He faced back to the mirror.

Mike stared blankly into space for a moment, saying nothing.

"I wonder how the maharajah wears *his* hair?" Greg asked.

"How old is he?"

"About the same as Aunt Zel?"

"Then he probably wears it very carefully, if he still has any," Mike replied. "Greg," he went on, "I hope you're not expecting too much of this maharajah. He's not some superhuman, you know."

"I know that, Dad," Greg replied. "I'm too sophisticated to think that a maharajah is really any different than—well, than you, for instance—except in training and outlook."

"How do you mean that exactly?" Mike asked warily.

"All I mean is that you live in a very small world and the maharajah lives in a very big world. You think locally and he thinks internationally."

"I wouldn't say that," Mike replied a little touchily. "I

think internationally more than you realize. I don't go around blabbing about it all the time, that's all. Just the other day, I was thinking about . . . uh, Laos. How's that for international thinking?"

"What were you thinking?" Greg asked.

"Oh . . . well, I was wondering if it's pronounced 'Lay-ohs,' or 'Louse.' I've heard it both ways."

"Dad, that isn't what I meant. Thinking of names of countries isn't thinking internationally. Basically, what I had in mind was economics."

"Okay, okay. You want to discuss international economics? So ahead. Shoot. You start it off. I'll discuss it with you."

Once more, Greg looked at him. "Well . . . which do you prefer, a controlled or a free market in gold?" he asked.

"Is that a trick question?"

Greg shook his head.

"Are there any other choices?"

"Sure there are other choices," Greg replied. "But, not according to the question. In the question, there are only two choices—controlled or free."

"Well . . . I don't know," Mike said thoughtfully. "I'm still more or less undecided. On the one hand, there are a lot of things to be said for a controlled market, and then, on the other hand— How do you see it?"

"A lot like you do," Greg replied, resuming the hair combing operation. That's why I'd like to discuss it with the maharajah. He does a lot of speculating in the gold market, Aunt Zel says. So he'll be able to discuss the pros

and cons of both with a little intel— What I mean is, from experience."

"That seems like a good approach," Mike nodded.

"With my background, I guess I could bring a down-to-earth, practical approach to international dealings," Greg said.

"Uh. . . a what?"

"What's needed right now, I sometimes think, is somebody who can look at things from the standpoint of the common people," Greg said. "And, since I spent my early years in the bosom of the common people, so to speak, I'm especially qualified. Because, although now I look at things in an international way, when I was younger I looked at things in a local way. See what I mean? The best of both worlds."

"In your early years?" Mike asked. "Like last week, you mean?"

"Time is relative," Greg replied.

"Be patient with me, will you, please," Mike said. "My intel—that is, my experience—is limited. Are you trying to tell me that you're thinking of becoming an international wheeler-dealer? Even before you finish high school?"

"Well . . . I guess I'd get a diploma first," Greg replied. "That doesn't mean I couldn't start operating before that, though, as a sort of free-lance. I mean, if I have something important and relevant to say to the world's political and economic leaders, wouldn't it be morally wrong for me to keep it to myself?"

"It would be hard to argue with that," Mike replied. "But. . . do you really think they'll listen?"

"Why not? If I'm one of the crowd, why not?" Greg said. "They listen to Aunt Zel, don't they? And you're her nephew and I'm your son."

"No international political or economic leaders have ever asked me for my opinion," Mike pointed out.

"That's because you haven't taken advantage of the opportunity, Dad. You just sat back and let the world go by, being an architect, and raising a family, but not taking advantage of your potential."

"Ah . . . yeah, potential . . . opportunity. . . . Greg, have you and Aunt Zel been discussing this? Has she told you that all these political leaders take advice from her?"

"Well, she says she tells them what to do."

"Do they do it?"

"I guess not," Greg admitted. "Because she told me a lot of things she's told them to do, and, according to what happened, I guess they did something else. But that doesn't mean that the opportunity isn't there. If I had some real good advice for them, they'd take it, wouldn't they?"

Mike raised his hands, palms upward, indicating ignorance on the subject.

"Anyway, I have some ideas I want to pass along to the maharajah," Greg said. "I think he'll be pretty interested."

"Okay . . . lots of luck," Mike said, rising, moving toward the doorway.

"Anything you want me to tell the maharajah?" Greg asked.

Mike halted. He thought for a second. "No. You

might ask him what ever happened to Sabu the Elephant Boy, though."

"Who?"

"You wouldn't remember him," Mike replied. "An old friend of Methuselah's and mine." Shaking his head in bewilderment and sorrow, he left.

In the recreation room, Carol tossed aside the book she had been holding but not reading and got up from the couch. She could not relax. Not with Alma in charge of the house and Alice doing all the work. The result, she knew, would be that a great number of necessary things would not get done and Alice, trying to do them all, nevertheless, would end up in a state of nervous exhaustion.

Carol tiptoed to the doorway and peeked out. The way was clear—except for a pile of comic books that one of the children had dropped just outside the living room. Quickly, Carol slipped out and picked up the books and headed toward the bedroom area with them. But on the way she spotted a tennis racket that had been left on a chair in the dining room. Detouring, she picked up the tennis racket and stuck it under her arm, then proceeded toward the bedrooms again.

As she was passing the corridor that led to the rear of the house, however, she sighted a scattering of coloring books and a box of crayons near the kitchen doorway. Surreptitiously, she slipped into the hallway, and began collecting the coloring books together. Halfway through the process, she dropped the tennis racket from under her arm. It clattered on the floor.

From out of nowhere, Alma appeared.

"Caught you!" Alma said.

Carol had kneeled to pick up the coloring books and crayons. Rising, she dropped the comic books and the few coloring books that she had picked up.

"Carol, you're not helping," Alma told her. "Look at that mess you've made. Have a little pity on Alice. She's the one who'll have to clean it up." She got hold of Carol by the shoulders and steered her back toward the recreation room. "You've a bundle of nerves," she told her. "I know the type. It's all tied in with insecurity. A lot of the executives I've met in show business have wives like that. Always doing the wrong thing, saying the wrong thing—at parties, I mean. It's no wonder they have so much trouble holding onto their husbands. But try not to think about it, dear. Maybe as people get to know you, you're different. Maybe you just give a bad first impression."

They had reached the recreation room.

"Mike hasn't ever mentioned—" Carol began.

Alma was laughing. "Men never tell their wives," she said. "There isn't any really kind way to say a thing like that, is there? So, the wives just go on, party after party, saying and doing the wrong things."

"We don't have many business parties," Carol said. "When we have people in, it's mostly friends."

Alma gasped, shocked. "Friends? But friends aren't deductible!"

"Uh. . . what?"

"My dear, when you have a party and invite business associates and clients, it's deductible as a business expense

on your income tax. But friends! My dear, if you want to see your friends, you go to *their* parties, you don't invite them to yours."

"Oh . . . well, I—"

"I'm glad you told me, anyway," Alma said. "Now, I understand why Mike isn't successful. It was puzzling me. He's so personable, so attractive. I've been baffled about why he hasn't been able to make it."

"Not successful?" Carol responded belligerently. "He's *very* successful!"

"Oh? He does all the architecting for the celebrities, then? And he's mentioned regularly in the gossip columns, is he?"

"Well . . . no. But that—"

"That, my dear," Alma smiled, "is the only true measure of success. Anyone can design supermarkets. But a chateau in downtown San Luis Obispo for Hollywood's current darling—*that* is immortality!"

Carol shook her head. "He doesn't do much of that," she said feebly.

"Whatever you do, *don't* blame yourself," Alma told her.

"You mean it's all my fault?"

"Nothing is ever *all* anyone's fault. I mean, it could be ninety-nine percent your fault and still not be *all* your fault. So, whatever you do—" Her face suddenly lighted up and, looking past Carol, toward the doorway, she called out, "There you are, Mike. We were just talking about you. And I was saying to Carol that she couldn't possibly be to blame for everything."

Carol turned and looked at Mike. He appeared to be coming out of a daze. "Did you talk to Greg?" she asked, concerned.

"We had a talk—in a way," Mike replied. "But I think he talked to me more than I talked to him. When I left, I had the impression that— Do you think it's possible for a son to be older than his father?"

"Physically or intellectually?"

"I guess we better not go into it," Mike decided.

"That's a wise decision," Alma told him. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I gather it concerns Greg. And if there's one thing I've learned, it's that discussing your children's problems is pointless. By the time you find a solution, the problems have changed. Now, getting on to something important, let's talk about the party."

Mike looked at Carol.

She shrugged, advising him that she knew no more about what Alma was referring to than he did.

"The party for your clients," Alma told him. "'Didn't I mention it to you before? Of course, I didn't. It was only a few minutes ago that I realized how desperately you need it. Shall we make it a masked ball? Or should it be something more intimate? Mmmmmm . . . barbecues are out . . . but what's in these days? Well, when in doubt, a formal dinner party is always acceptable. How many will we be having—one hundred, two hundred?"

Mike addressed Carol. "Why do I have to have a party for my clients?" he inquired.

"Don't ask me," she replied. "I'm just a guest. Ask your wife." She pointed to Alma. "Her."

Mike turned his attention to Alma. "Why—"

"Because, as your helpmate, it's my first responsibility to further your career," Alma replied.

Mike looked puzzled. "Did that answer my question?"

"*That* is how you further your career—by having parties for your clients," she went on. "I mean, let's face it, Mike, anybody can put on a hard hat and architect. It's in the social arena where a man either makes it or doesn't. Believe me, I know. Admit it now, haven't I had a lit-tle bit more experience in show business than you have?"

"How did show business get into it?" Mike asked. "We were talking about architecture."

"Oh, they're the same, I'm sure," Alma replied. "Except, of course, for the hard hats. Now, it might be best," she said, "to have the party in the honor of one of your clients. The one, naturally, who has the best contacts in Hollywood. Which one would that be?"

"Well . . . I've done some work for a fellow who has a chain of orange juice stands . . . several of them in Los Angeles. He might—"

"Contacts in the movie colony, Mike."

"None," Mike replied, relieved.

"Are you positive?"

"None of them have ever mentioned it."

"One of them has the contacts," Alma said. "We'll just have to get them all together and, in a subtle way, of course, interrogate them. We can use the party to do that. Then we'll use the follow-up party to honor the one we find to have the contacts." She turned to Carol. "See how complicated it is? But don't feel that you couldn't ever possibly learn to do it, dear. People do occasionally rise about their limitations." Facing Mike again, she said,

"Now, I want you to tell me all about all of your clients." She put a hand on his arm and began guiding him out of the room. "I want to know what they believe, how they vote, what private schools they send their children to, what professional football team they root for—everything. It's just possible that I may decide that we can't have the party here. This place might not be good enough for them."

"This is my house!" Mike protested. "I designed it!"

"And it's very nice," Alma assured him as they passed through the doorway. "I like it; I really do. The corners all came out so . . . so square. I know I could never do a thing like that . . . without instructions to follow. But, Mike," she said, as they moved along the corridor, "we want to make an impression. And square corners, although they're probably important—to people who dust—to a client, someone important, with important things on his mind. . . ."

Carol, still in the recreation room, heard no more of the conversation. Mike and Alma had passed beyond her range of hearing. She looked at the book that, so far, she had not been able to work up an interest in. But she did not pick it up. Sighing gloomily, she lay down on the couch and closed her eyes. If she could just fall asleep, she thought, there was the possibility that when she woke up she would find that she had been having a nightmare, and Alma Watts and The Numbers Racket and Aunt Zel and Ohoho did not, in fact, exist. The major problem, though, was going to be to get to sleep. She could hear rock coming from the direction of the trailer. The house was trembling slightly. And she

wanted to be awake to hear it when the next antique fell off a shelf and splattered.

The members of the Brady family who had not been commandeered by either Alma, Aunt Zel or the Watts boys—Peter, Bobby, Jan and Cindy—were at that moment in the kitchen, watching as Alice prepared lunch for them.

"There goes that music again," Bobby said unenthusiastically. "I like it. But I wish it was on the radio so sometimes I could turn it off."

"They have to play all the time so Marcia can practice," Jan said. "She's going on the road."

"When she sings, sometimes," Bobby said, "it sounds like she's already on the road and somebody's running over her."

"I think she sings good," Cindy said. "She sings better than all those people who sing the songs the same way all the time. The way Marcia sings them, you have to guess what it is. It's more fun that way."

"She sings better than Greg does, anyway," Peter said.

"How do you know?" Jan asked. "Greg hasn't been singing."

"That's what I mean—he hasn't been doing anything," Peter replied. "He just hangs around Aunt Zel. You know what I think? I think he's suffering from a malnutrition. Remember a couple weeks ago when he got hit in the head with the softball? He said it didn't hurt him, but I'll bet he got a severe malnutrition and it's just now showing up."

"Do you mean concussion?" Alice asked.

"Is that a hit in the head?"

"Well, it's closer to a hit in the head than malnutrition is," Alice replied.

"The whole family must have a concussion—except us," Jan said. "What's the matter with Mike and Mom, Alice? You know what they look like these days? They look like they just got over being cross-eyed."

"I'm not sure—"

"Funny in the eyes," Jan said.

"Stunned?"

"Maybe. Funny, anyway."

"I think that's because they have several situations going all at the same time and they're not sure which one to try to handle first, or how, exactly, to handle any of them or— In a nutshell, it's a little like being cross-eyed mentally."

"Is that why nobody made my bed today?" Cindy asked.

"You could try to make it yourself," Alice replied.

"I did try. But when I did it on one side and then went around to the other side and pulled on the things, it got un-did on the first side."

"I'll try to get to it later this afternoon," Alice said.

"Why doesn't Mother do it?"

"She's a guest—and don't ask me to explain that," Alice said.

"Some vacation," Cindy grumbled.

"You think you've got it tough," Alice said. "How would you like to have your kitchen turned into a humming bird egg steamery every morning?"

"That's okay," Peter said. "I just wish we could watch. Greg won't let us in. He says if anybody's watching, the egg gets steamed too hard—or too soft."

"*He* watches," Bobby protested.

"He isn't watching, he says, he's precipitating," Peter replied.

"Participating," Alice told him.

"Whatever it is, it sure has ruined him for life," Peter said. "He never plays softball any more. Yesterday, I told him the guys were getting up a game, and he asked me a game of what. What'd he think?"

"I think all that steam is getting in his eyes and leaking back to his brain," Jan said. "Steam is water, isn't it?"

"You mean you think he has water on the knee on the brain?" Peter asked worriedly.

"Something like that," Jan nodded.

"I had that when I was learning to swim," Bobby said. "It went in through my ears."

"Where we don't have water is on this kitchen floor," Alice said. "Who has time to mop it?"

"You waxed it, though, yesterday, didn't you?" Jan said.

"Sure. But right over spilled corn flakes and apple seeds and footprints. What it really needs is a good scrubbing. I don't have time, though."

"Neither does the guest, I guess," Cindy said.

"You know how many meals I get a day these days?" Alice said. "Six."

"We only eat three," Peter pointed out.

"All I know is I'm doing twice as much work as I used to," Alice said. "Before, we had three meals a day. So,

now, we must be having six. Work it out. Two times three is six, isn't it?"

"We ought to send all the visitors an amorous note," Peter said.

"That's the *last* thing any of them will get from me," Alice replied. "Why amorous?"

"So they won't know who sent it, naturally."

Alice thought for a second, then said, "I think you mean anonymous, not amorous. What would we say in it?"

"We could tell them their house is on fire, like the lady bugs," Cindy said. "Then they'd fly away home."

"They don't have homes," Alice replied. "The Five Rackets and a Mother go from town to town to town, and Aunt Zel lives in hotel suites—several of them, here and there and everywhere."

"We could say: If you want a prize, go stand on the corner 'til somebody comes by and gives you one," Bobby suggested.

"Anonymous notes aren't playing fair, anyway," Alice said. "If you're afraid to sign your name, don't send it."

"I'll sign my name," Bobby said.

"That would— Never mind. Just take my word for it, it wouldn't work," Alice told him.

"Somebody better do *some*thing, that's all I can say," Jan said. "If somebody doesn't, our whole vacation is going to be like this."

Alice, who was making sandwiches, stopped and turned toward the children, who were seated around the kitchen table. "Horrible as it is, that's true," she said. "The situation might even be worse than that. I've been

telling myself this was all going to end soon . . . like tomorrow or the next day. But it isn't ending, it's getting worse. I think maybe the ending needs a little helping along." She pushed the sandwich board away. "Is your mother still in the recreation room?"

"Which mother?" Jan asked. "The mother that's now the guest but used to be mother, or the mother that's now the mother but used to be the guest?"

"As I recall, this mother's name was Carol—does that give you a clue?"

"She's still in the recreation room," Jan nodded.

"She's not reading a book," Peter said.

"Then I won't be interrupting anything," Alice said, heading for the doorway.

The children jumped up and followed.

As Alice entered the recreation room a few seconds later, Carol, who had been lying on the couch, forcing herself to read, leaped to her feet. "There *is* a U.S. Cavalry!" she cried out, happy to have company.

"I come here as a delegation of one, to—" Alice began.

Carol pointed behind Alice.

Looking back, Alice saw the children. They had halted at the entrance to the recreation room. "Make that a delegation of five," she said, facing Carol once more. "A delegation of five aroused, enraged members of this household, and we're here to lodge a protest!"

"I think you came to the wrong place," Carol replied sadly. "I'm relaxing and enjoying myself. It's the lady of the house who gets all the protests. See her. Ahhh . . . where is she, anyway?"

"Who knows?" Alice answered. "It wouldn't do any

good to see her, though. She's one of the ones we're protesting about."

Carol looked toward the children, then returned her attention to Alice. "I guess I know what you're getting at," she said. "And I know you're getting a lot of extra work piled on you, Alice. But . . . could you just go along with it for a day or so more? I mean, I can't exactly say that I'm overjoyed by what's happening, either. But, when you have guests in the house, well . . . you know. . . ."

"My delegation has the feeling that the present situation could continue for a good while," Alice said.

Carol cringed. "I wish you wouldn't use language like that in front of the children, Alice."

"They used it in front of me!" Alice replied defensively.

"Down with guests!" Cindy said from the doorway.

"Shhhhhhh!" Carol said.

"The delegation feels," Alice went on, "that since the guests intend to leave here someday, anyway, anything that might be done to speed up the departure would really be an act of friendliness."

"How do you figure that?" Carol asked.

"I don't explain the delegation's pronouncements, I just deliver them," Alice replied.

"Mmmmmmm . . . well, like doing what to speed up the departure?" Carol asked.

"The head of the delegation—that would be me, Alice—has some ideas that she would be willing to discuss," Alice answered. "These ideas probably ought to be discussed in private, however."

"I think that might be prudent," Carol nodded. She addressed the children. "Isn't it lunch time?" she said. "Why don't you go to the kitchen and see what you can find."

"They'll find sandwiches," Alice said. "Three kinds—on the counter," she told the children.

"Can't we stay and listen?" Jan asked.

Carol shook her head. "You're too young. I have a feeling that the tactics are going to get a little . . . well, a little . . . a little—"

"Dirty?" Alice suggested.

Carol made hurried shooing motions to the children. "Out, out, out!"

8

Aunt Zel and Greg arrived in the city, driven by Ohoho in the limousine, shortly after noon. They went directly to the hotel where the maharajah was staying. The hotel lobby itself was so grand, with its high, decorated ceilings, huge pillars, thick carpeting, huge palms and ornately carved furniture, that Greg, for a moment, had an idea that he had entered a palace, one that the maharajah had towed along behind his plane, perhaps, in the way that Aunt Zel had brought along her trailer full of antiques.

"There is only one thing you must remember when you're in the presence of the maharajah," Aunt Zel said as she and Greg entered the elevator that would take them to the maharajah's floor. "Nutmeg-sniffing is completely forbidden."

Greg laughed. "I thought you said nutmeg-sniffing," he said.

"I did, dear." She looked at him suspiciously. "You're not one of those confirmed nutmeg-sniffers, are you?"

"I never even heard of it," he replied.

"Fine. The maharajah's religion won't allow him even to remain in the presence of a nutmeg-sniffer," she explained. "Personally, he has nothing against them. Some of his best friends, he often says, are nutmeg-sniffers. But, of course, they never sniff while they're in his presence."

"What religion is that?" Greg asked, puzzled.

"The maharajah's own," Aunt Zel replied. "It's not the one he was born to, of course. Too many radicals were being allowed into that religion, he felt, giving it a bad name. So, he established his own. It has a quite limited membership. Only the maharajah and a few very close friends—none of them nutmeg-sniffers, you may be sure."

The elevator halted and the door opened and Aunt Zel and Greg got out. They were met by a guard, a large brown-skinned man. He was dressed in the Western fashion, except for a turban. He recognized Aunt Zel and smiled and bowed and then led her and Greg to the maharajah's suite. He left them in the huge foyer when he went into the suite to tell the maharajah that they had arrived. The foyer was a lot like the lobby, only a bit smaller.

"Whom do they rent this to when the maharajah isn't here?" Greg whispered.

"Rent it to?" Aunt Zel replied, appalled. "The maharajah wouldn't allow them to rent it to anyone else, dear.

He leases it year-round. Otherwise, strangers would use it. Strangers always track in mud, you know."

"Oh."

The guard returned, then led Greg and Aunt Zel into the suite, through room after room. Each of the rooms was decorated in a different style. None of the styles was later than the early eighteen-hundreds, however. They finally reached a huge sitting room. The maharajah, a very large, very fat man, with a smiling face and bright eyes, rose from a thronelike chair to greet them. He, too, was dressed in Western clothes, save for a turban. He hugged Aunt Zel affectionately. Then she introduced him to Greg.

"Yes, Zel told me about you on the phone the other day when I called," the maharajah said to him. "You're the orchestra conductor, aren't you?"

Greg looked baffled.

"No, dear, that was some of the other boys. They have a musical band of some sort," Aunt Zel told the maharajah.

"Ah, yes," he nodded. He patted Greg on the head. "Well, I never forget a face, anyway, Fred," he said.

"Greg, sir."

"Right-O!" The maharajah smiled. Then he addressed Aunt Zel again. "Speaking of that," he said, "I was talking to the prime minister on the phone this morning. When I told him you were coming to lunch, he said he wished he could join us. I offered to send a plane for him, naturally. But he begged off. There was some shooting going on outside the window, he said. He had the feeling that his government was going to be overthrown."

"This must be Thursday," Aunt Zel said. "Thursdays are always bad for the prime minister."

"Yes. It was a Thursday, as I recall, that his party came to power. His life has been one crisis after another ever since."

"Which prime minister is that?" Greg asked.

"Alfred," the maharajah replied. He gestured toward a doorway. "Shall we go in to lunch?" he said. Then, leading the way, he said, "We're using the small dining room —seats only around fifty or something like that. I hope you don't mind. I thought that, considering the situation, something intimate would be preferable."

"I didn't hear about any revolutions anywhere this morning," Greg said, pursuing the subject of the prime minister named Alfred and the shooting outside his window. "I listened to the news on the radio and there wasn't a word about it."

"It's probably a private revolution," Aunt Zel said.

"On the other hand, that may have been a motor backfiring outside his window, not a gun shooting," the maharajah said. "I sometimes suspect that Alfred wouldn't know the difference. Frankly, if he were prime minister of my country, I rather think I'd move somewhere else. He has some very odd ideas about taxation."

"What, for instance?" Greg asked, eager to discuss the matter.

"He thinks taxation is necessary," the maharajah replied, shuddering. "Strange . . . strange . . . strange. . . ."

"Well, it is, sort of," Greg said. "Without taxes, how would we support the government?"

"Exactly," the maharajah replied. "The government

exists to collect the taxes to support itself. Stop collecting taxes, and there'd be no need for the government. What would it do if it didn't have taxes to collect? Twiddle its thumbs? I see no reason for supporting an organization like that."

"Brilliant!" Aunt Zel said. She then addressed Greg. "That's the mark of a superior mind, dear," she told him. "The ability to simplify. The simple things are always the best things—you've heard that, haven't you?"

"Yes, maam, but—"

"Here we are!" the maharajah announced, leading them into a huge room that was decorated in the manner of the Victorian era. There was a table that was long enough to seat, as the maharajah had guessed, approximately fifty. A half-dozen servants were present. Three of them pulled out chairs at one end of the table. "You may sit anywhere you like," the maharajah said to Aunt Zel and Greg. "I thought, however, that if we all stayed in this general vicinity we'd be able to converse without the assistance of the public address system."

"Lovely idea!" Aunt Zel said. "Reminds me of that time when we were all pinned down in that hotel suite in Djakarta. The coziness, I mean."

When they were seated, one of the servants began serving appetizers—deviled anteater eggs, baked squid's claws, pickled turtle shell.

"So, you're visiting your father, eh?" the maharajah said to Aunt Zel ."He must be getting along in years."

"My nephew—an architect," Aunt Zel replied. "Dear Father passed on many, many years ago."

"Not surprised—at his age," the maharajah said. He

put a hand on his right shoulder. "I'm not as nimble as I once was, myself," he said. "I have Bedloe's Cramp in this shoulder. Tightens up on me like a vise when the weather turns damp."

"Why, that sounds like my Wormser's Pinch—except that I get it in the knees," Aunt Zel said. "Her Highness has it, too, you know."

"Speaking of Her Highness," Greg said. "I was saying to one of my friends the other day that royalty is an anachron . . . uh, anchoronka . . . anackronockrakick . . . what I mean is, it's obsolete."

"An anachronism, dear," Aunt Zel said.

The maharajah reached over and patted Greg on the head again. "Good lad, Ned," he said. "We must share whatever we have with our friends, even if it's nothing but ignorance, eh?" He turned back to Aunt Zel. "As a matter of fact," he said, "Her Highness and I were discussing that very thing just three days ago. She was having lunch with me in my suite at the King Rodney Hotel. She'll go anywhere, you know, to get out of the palace for a few hours."

"I suspect it's not so much the palace she wants to get away from as it is her mother-in-law," Aunt Zel said. "The Queen Mother is slipping a bit, I understand. Her Highness tells me that she has this idea that someone is trying to make off with the crown jewels and she wants to sleep with them under her pillow."

"Yes . . . overactive imagination," the maharajah nodded. "The Bay of Bosphorus Syndrome—that's the technical term, I believe."

"I just wonder," Greg said, "what the crown jewels

would bring on the open market. In these inflationary times, when investors are converting cash into—"

"Like the squid, George?" the maharajah asked, breaking in.

"I'm Greg," Greg said.

The maharajah looked at Aunt Zel, as if expecting an explanation.

"That's his name," she told the maharajah.

"Oh! I thought it was one of those odd expressions the youngsters use these days. I asked one of my brother's boys about the state of his health a few weeks ago and he replied by stating that he was grubby."

"Maybe he said 'groovy,' " Greg suggested.

"You're absolutely right, Edgar," the maharajah replied. "My memory isn't what it used to be." He focused his attention on Aunt Zel again. "My physician tells me I have a touch of Port Said Complaint," he said. "It attacks the left side of the brain, causing the victim to list slightly to port—hence the name, of course. And, in that position, leaning leftward, one's memory lobes are off-balance. But, enough about me. Let's talk about you. How is your rheumatism faring?"

Greg listened for a while as Aunt Zel answered. But after she had been discoursing on the state of her rheumatism for approximately a quarter of an hour, non-stop, his attention wandered. Reflecting on how the conversation had gone so far, he began to doubt that he would be able to draw the maharajah into a discussion of international political or economic matters. As a matter of fact, he realized, it was highly unlikely that he would even be able to get the maharajah to remember his name.

At the Brady house, Alma Watts burst into the recreation room, followed wearily by Mike. Alma confronted Carol who, by sheer determination had managed to read the first page of the first chapter of the book that Alma had forced upon her and was about to embark upon the second page. Alma's arrival, which was sudden and noisy, caused Carol to start and then hurl the book into the air, thereby losing her place.

"We need your help," Alma told Carol. "We've whittled the list for the party down to yours and Mike's one hundred and fifty most intimate contacts, but there are some of them whose first names he can't remember." She began shuffling the papers she was holding. "There's somebody named Ambrose, for instance. It sounds like a first name, but it isn't, so what's the first name?"

Carol squinted, thinking. "Gee, I don't— Where did you get these names?"

"From the address book," Alma replied.

"Oh . . . that explains it," Carol said. "That's the company that made the book. Ambrose Stationery Company."

Alma frowned. "I wonder if they have any contacts in Hollywood. . . ."

"Alma, we can't invite a whole—"

A cry of terrible pain came from the direction of the kitchen.

"That was Alice!" Carol said, leaping up.

The three raced from the recreation room. When they reached the kitchen, they found Alice bent over, holding onto the edge of a counter.

"What is it?" Mike asked, worried. "We heard it all the way into the recreation room."

"It's her back," Carol said.

Mike looked at her. "How do you know?"

"Oh, well we— That is— Tell them, Alice," she pleaded.

"It's my back," Alice said dutifully. "I can't straighten up."

"We better get you to a hospital fast," Mike said, reaching for the telephone. "A thing like that—"

"No, no, that's not necessary," Alice said. "It'll pass. This happens all the time. Believe me, it's not serious. I just can't do my work for a day or so."

Mike looked at her puzzledly. "Alice, I don't remember any—"

"Yes, you do, Mike!" Carol said. "Remember how, when we were pinned down in that hotel suite in Djakarta and Alice's back went out."

Mike stared at her. "Went out?"

"Went out and got six hamburgers, three malts, five orders of French fries, and one cheeseburger," Alice said. "And I slipped a disc carrying it all."

Mike turned the stare on Alice.

"What Alice means is," Carol said, "she won't be able to do a *thing—not a thing*—until she recovers. And, in the meantime, somebody else will have to take care of the house. So, I guess I'll have to give up being a guest and—"

"Oh, no!" Alma broke in. "No, you can't! This is my big chance!"

"Your big chance?" Carol said in mock bewilderment.

"Don't you see it?" Alma said excitedly. "The star—that's Alice—can't go on! Someone has to take her place!"

"Well, if you had more experience," Carol said, "I suppose you could—"

"Experience! What's experience? Talent, that's what's needed!" Alma said.

"Running a whole house just isn't that easy," Alice told Alma.

"How can you say that? I've been doing it all day. And has anything gone wrong? There hasn't been one hitch. Of course, I admit, I haven't been doing *every*thing. But that's only becuuse I wanted the rest of you to have the feeling of being needed."

"Let me get this straight," Carol said to her. "From now on, you want to do everything—is that right? The cooking, the clean—"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh!" Alma interrupted. "You're the guest, you shouldn't even know about such things. I've been a guest hundreds of times and I *never* knew what was going on behind the scenes." She made shooing motions to Mike and Carol. "Out of my kitchen," she said. "The star always starts dinner about this time of day."

Carol began helping Alice from the room. "You can share my couch with me," she said. "You can share my book, too. I'll take it apart and you can read it from front to back and I'll read it from back to front."

"Don't mention 'back,'" Alice replied, hobbling out with Carol's assistance.

"Alma—" Mike said.

"Out!"

Mike shrugged and tagged after Carol and Alice. As he departed, he heard Alma opening and closing cabinet doors, one after another, apparently looking for something. He caught up with his wife and Alice as they were entering the recreation room. He was not greatly surprised to find that Alice was no longer bent over.

"That was a fast recovery," he said to her.

"I haven't recovered," she replied. "I still have the same thing I had before."

"Why aren't you doubled over?"

"It's too hard to walk that way," she explained, settling at one end of the couch. "How was—"

Alma suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Quickly, Alice bent forward.

"I'm sorry to be a bother," Alma said. "But I promise this is the last time I'll ask for help. I've been all through the cabinets and I can't find the cans of *epaule de mouton aux lentilles*."

"I'm not surprised," Alice said. "I've been through those cabinets hundreds of times and I can't recall ever seeing any cans of that, whatever it is, either. What is it?"

"Well . . . I'm not positive," Alma replied. "All I know is, it tastes like mutton, and it's my favorite. I always order it when I'm in Paris."

"Oh, *that!*" Alice said. "I'm sorry. The A&P was fresh out when I did the shopping."

Alma looked devastated. "And I was looking forward so much to French cooking. . . . Oh, well, the show

must go on." She started to leave, then paused for a second. "Remember—relax," she told Mike, Carol and Alice. Then she departed.

"This isn't going to work," Mike said. "She doesn't know the first thing about taking care of a house."

"*That* is why it *is* going to work," Carol told him. "Alma is going to learn very quickly that there's more to leading the square life than sleeping 'til noon and shopping for leisure aprons. In fact—" She looked at her watch. "—in a very short time—"

A child's cry of pain was heard.

Mike dashed toward the doorway.

But Carol called him back. "Wait!" she said. "It's all right—that's Cindy."

"Right on schedule," Alice nodded.

"But she sounded hurt," Mike said.

"Only sounded," Carol assured him. "What happens to me or to Alice whenever we start dinner? Cindy comes in crying with a scraped knee—right? So, it's only fair for Alma to get the same thing."

Mike did not seem too pleased about the idea. "What else do you have planned?" he asked.

"Just wait a couple minutes," Carol replied. "The second Alma gets involved in patching up Cindy's knee with a Band-Aid, Peter will put in an appearance. His bike will have a flat tire."

At that moment, Cindy appeared. "It didn't work," she told her mother. "I guess I should have really scraped my knee."

"Why?" Carol asked. "You never really have a scraped

knee when you come in crying to me that you have a scraped knee."

"But she didn't do anything about it like you do," Cindy said. "She just told me it wasn't scraped."

"What do *you* do?" Mike asked Carol.

"I always put a Band-Aid on it anyway," Carol replied. "I don't look on them as bandages. I see them as therapy."

Mike laughed. "Apparently you and Alma don't see things the same way. I notice . . ." he added, "that her way takes less time."

"But it isn't as nice," Alice said. "Efficiency is all right, but it shouldn't be practiced on small children. I remember—I was a small child once myself."

"Didn't people stare at you?" Cindy asked.

"Why?"

"You're too big for a little child."

"Cindy, as long as you're not doing anything else, why don't you go back to the kitchen and keep an eye on things," Carol said.

"You're sending her to spy," Mike told Carol.

"She wants to," Carol said, urging Cindy out of the room. "She would have volunteered if I'd given her a chance."

As Cindy left, Peter entered. He looked as if he had just seen something that he could not quite believe.

"What did she say about the tire?" Carol asked quickly.

Peter peered at her for a moment in silence, then he replied, "She told me to bring it in and she'd fix it."

Carol's face fell. "Really? Gee, I hardly expected that. I thought she'd— Well, I'm not sure what I expected. I never in this world thought she'd offer to repair a blown-out bicycle tire, though."

"What did you do, Peter?" Mike asked.

"I took it to her."

"You mean you really had a puncture?" Alice said.

Peter nodded. "I didn't think I ought to lie about it. So, before I went in to tell her I had a tire that needed fixing, I punctured it."

"You're a good boy," Carol told him. "But I expect that of you. It's Alma I can't figure out. There she is, right in the middle of doing something French with mutton, and she takes time out to patch a kid's bicycle tire!"

"That's the thing," Peter said. "She isn't patching it. She's boiling it in a pot of water."

"Boil—"

"She calls it vulcanizing it," Peter said.

"And Ein Watts thinks *he*'s super cool!" Alice said. "He could take lessons from his mother. There's a woman who can do something French with mutton, handle scrapes and bruises, and manufacture a new tire from the burnt-out rubber of the old one all at once."

"Don't be too sure," Carol said. "She may not really be vulcanizing that tire. That may be the soup she's boiling."

Cindy reappeared. "Secret spy reporting," she said. "Guess what we might have for dessert."

"Bicycle tire?" Alice guessed.

"Jello," Cindy replied.

"Why do you say 'might' have?" Carol asked.

"Well, she was looking for some mold to pour it in," Cindy replied, "and all she could find was some little flower pots. So she used them."

Alice was nodding, picturing the process in mind. "And the Jello is running out the holes in the bottom."

Cindy smiled, agreeing with Alice's estimate of the situation.

"Now," Carol said, pleased, "I think we can all relax. Everything is proceeding exactly as planned. By dinner time, that kitchen will be such a mess it will take us a week to clean it up."

"But it will be worth it," Alice said. "I don't think we'll hear any more about what a breeze taking care of a house is after that."

"Do you realize what you two have turned into?" Mike said to Carol and Alice. "That woman is a guest in this house and you're gloating because she's out there in the kitchen getting herself deeper and deeper into trouble!"

"Whose idea was it?" Carol asked.

"Well . . . yes, as a matter of fact," Mike smiled, "she did sort of ask for it." He frowned again. "But I'm not going to enjoy it. Besides—" He looked out a window. "It's evening already. I'm beginning to worry about Greg."

"Why?" Carol asked. "He's with Aunt Zel and Ohoho. What do you think might happen to him?"

"I'm afraid he's enjoying himself," Mike replied.

"Oh . . . yes, I see what you mean," Carol said. "Mike . . . suppose he comes back from that lunch with the maharajah and you find out that they—Greg and the maha-

rajah—sort of . . . well, hit it off—if that's the expression?"

"Do? I don't intend to do anything. I'd be proud of him. What's wrong with having a maharajah for a friend?"

"What I mean is, are you going to tell him that Aunt Zel wants to take him with her . . . and are you going to give him the chance to go?"

Mike turned his back to her and went to the window. He stood that way for several minutes, not speaking. Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "If he were older—if I really thought he could make a mature decision—then I'd give him the choice. But since he isn't older, his well-being is still my responsibility. And I think he'll be better off here with the family." He grinned. "The international jet set will just have to struggle along without him for a few years," he said, facing the others again.

"And the same goes for Marcia!" Carol said with sudden determination. "When The Numbers Racket goes back on the road, she is *not* going with them. I never intended to let her go. But I certainly have been wishy-washy about telling her so. It's about time I put my foot—"

"Shhhhhh!" a voice said from the doorway.

When they turned toward it, they found Marcia in the opening. She was no longer wearing the poncho and the flower-bedecked straw hat. She was dressed in the usual way. But what was most noticeable was the baseball bat she was carrying.

"Isn't that wonderful!" Carol said happily. "That's all

she needed to snap her out of it—a healthy interest in sports."

"Shhhhhhh!" Marcia said again. "It'll hear you!"

The others exchanged looks, then turned their attention back to Marcia.

"It what?" Mike asked, keeping his voice low.

"It the burglar," Marcia replied. "Why do you think I'm carrying this baseball bat? I saw it out the window. It was coming from the direction of the house next door."

"From Madge's and Harvey's?" Carol asked. "Why are you calling it an 'it'? What does it look like?"

"I don't know what it looks like," Marcia replied. "It's a human figure, that's all I know. So I had to call it an it. I don't want to be discriminatory and call it a he. Men get blamed for all the burglaries. But how do we know that half of them aren't committed by women? Especially if the burglar isn't caught. So, if I wanted to be fair, I couldn't say 'he' or 'she'. I had to say 'it.' "

"That's sweet of you, dear," Carol told her. "And I'm glad to see—" She pointed to the baseball bat. "—that you're getting involved in things again."

Marcia nodded. "I won't be going on the road, I guess," she said. "I've decided to stay home and conform by being involved instead of going with The Numbers Racket and conform by not being involved. You know what I've decided? There isn't much you can do that somebody else isn't doing it already. There may not be any such thing as a non-conformist."

From the window, Mike said, "Marcia, are you sure you weren't seeing shadows? I don't see any moving figure."

"Of course not!" Marcia replied. "He was headed toward the back of the house. Oh! I said 'he.' " She shook her head sadly. "See how easy it is to discriminate against men when you're talking about burglars."

"Bite your tongue," Alice suggested.

"No—hold it," Mike said. "Marcia, what makes you so positive this 'it' you saw was a burglar?"

"Because it was coming from the house next door. It probably saw that note on the door."

"Of course, Mike!" Carol said. "The note that Madge put on the door in case a burglar started prowling around her house. She figured that if he—sorry; 'it,' I mean—if it saw the note it'd—"

"I know!" Mike broke in. "But that's the most ridiculous— Well . . . nothing that's happened lately has made much sense. I'll . . . I'll check it out." He headed for the doorway. "The rest of you better stay here."

"Don't you want me to come along?" Marcia asked, waving the bat.

"No. Especially not you. I don't need anybody pounding on me from behind while I'm wrestling a burglar."

"I wouldn't—" Marcia began.

But Mike was gone.

"The way things have been going, you probably would," Carol told her daughter.

After leaving the recreation room, Mike strode to the front foyer and opened the front door. He saw the limousine pulling up in front, returning Aunt Zel and Greg from the visit to the maharajah. He did not wait for them, however. First, he wanted to make sure that there

was no burglar prowling around the house. So, leaving the front door open, he strode toward the rear of the house.

At the entrace to the kitchen, Mike halted and looked in. Alma was mixing something in a bowl. He sniffed the air.

"That smells pretty good," Mike said. "What is it?"

Alma sniffed, too. Then she cried out in alarm. "My bicycle tire is burning!" and ran toward the stove.

"Have you heard any strange noises?" Mike asked.

"What kind?" She was fishing the tire from the pot.

"Burglar sounds."

Alma screamed. "Help! Burglar!"

Deciding that by staying he would only hinder the search, not help it, Mike moved on. A second later, he reached the rear door and opened it—and found himself face to face with a large, surprised-looking man, who appeared to have been about to knock on the door. At least, he had a fist raised.

Just as Mike was about to duck, taking no chances, realizing that it was possible that the man intended to rap on him rather than the door, he heard Alma cry out from behind him.

"You bum!" she shrieked.

Mike discarded the idea of ducking. Alma's outcry had identified the stranger for him. He realized that he was eyeball to eyeball with Alma's bum of a husband, Roger Watts.

9

A split second after Alma Watts, spotting her husband at the back door, yelled "You bum!" there was a sound of a crash from the front part of the house.

Realizing that the crash probably represented the demise of another antique, Mike whipped around and ran toward the sound, leaving Alma and Roger to work out their difficulties without his assistance.

As Mike galloped into the foyer, he saw that Aunt Zel and Greg had entered the house, having returned from the visit to the maharajah. Aunt Zel, aghast, was staring down at the remains of what might have been anything from a cup to a pot. Pieces were scattered widely. Greg, standing beside her, looked somewhat stunned. But evidently it was not the crash that bothered him, for he was

staring vacantly into space, as if not especially interested in the sad fate of the antique.

"Who? What?" Mike asked, addressing Aunt Zel.

"My King Tut pot!" she wailed.

"That answers 'what,'" Mike replied. "Now, who?"

From the direction of the living room came the voice of Peter. "I'm sorry, Dad," he said sheepishly. "I guess I'm the who."

Mike turned toward the voice. He saw Peter and Bobby moving toward the foyer, both looking guilty.

"It's not Peter's fault, Dad," Bobby said. "I'm the one who missed it."

"Will somebody tell me what happened!" Mike demanded.

"The king is dead," Greg murmured, still looking slightly dazed.

"I know that! What I want to know is how!"

Peter pointed to a round, white object in the midst of the pieces of King Tut pot. "See that?" he said. "That thing that looks like it's not part of the pot? Well . . . it's not."

"That's a softball!" Mike said.

Peter nodded. "I was teaching Bobby how to snag grounders," he said. "Only . . . well. . . ."

"That's one I didn't snag," Bobby explained, pointing to the ball. "It went right between my feet and came out here and zapped the king."

"How many times have you been told—" Mike began.

"Eighty-thousand," Peter told him.

"Peter didn't know I'd miss that grounder, Dad,"

Bobby said. "He told me how to stop it. It isn't his fault I missed it."

Mike turned to Aunt Zel, who, with Greg's help, was picking up the pieces. "Aunt Zel, I'm terribly sorry," he said. "What can I say? What can I do? Can it be replaced?"

"Never!" she replied. "Michael, this is terrible!"

"I know, I know . . . but. . . . Frankly, Aunt Zel, those antiques don't belong in a house with boys."

"What doesn't belong in the house is a baseball!" she replied, rising. She faced Peter and Bobby. "Which one of you brought it in?"

"Not me," Peter replied. "I found it in the kitchen, Aunt Zel."

"Not me, either," Bobby said. "The first time I saw it, it was zingging along the old ground . . . rug, that is."

"Aunt Zel," Mike said, "nobody ever brings baseballs into the house. They slip in themselves. The same thing happened when I was a boy. I broke almost a whole set of my mother's china when I was young with a ball that not only sneaked into the house but also flew out of my hand at just the wrong moment. The fact is, if you live in a house with boys, things like this happen."

"But my King Tut!"

"Your King Tut should have been someplace where it would have been safe," Mike said.

"Michael, I disagree with you," Aunt Zel said. "Not all boys are baseball players. And some wouldn't dare pitch a ball of any kind inside a house. Now, Greg, for instance," she went on, smiling fondly at Greg, "would

never do anything that would endanger my babies. He simply is not a rough sort of person." She glanced disapprovingly at Peter and Bobby. "Like some," she added.

Greg brightened suddenly. But then, just as quickly, he suppressed the smile that was about to break out on his face. "Aunt Zel," he said soberly, "I think there's something you ought to know about me. I try hard to keep it under control, but, deep down, I'm kind of a baseballaholic."

The others all stared at him interestedly.

"I'm okay as long as I don't see a baseball," Greg went on, still addressing Aunt Zel. "Sometimes I go along for months being normal. But then, I happen across a baseball somewhere and I just go all to pieces. I have to toss it up or pitch it or bat it. I'm like a madman."

Aunt Zel was peering at him doubtfully.

"Oh, that's true," Mike said to her. "It happens especially in spring. When Greg gets his hands on a baseball in spring he goes completely— Well, I don't like to say it."

"But, surely, if you were indoors—" Aunt Zel began.

"That's where I'm at my worst," Greg told her. "If I'm inside, I have to get outside. Outside where I can peg that old ball around. And if I happened to be inside when the spell hit . . . and I had a ball in my hands. . . ." He looked around at the antiques on the shelves. "Well . . . I might run up quite a bill. . . ."

Aunt Zel shuddered. "Michael," she said, "I'm behind schedule. I really think I ought to be leaving right away." She motioned to Greg. "Please, dear, go tell

Ohoho that I want to be moving on as soon as possible. Have him remove those musicians from my trailer and start packing my babies."

"Yes maam," Greg replied, grinning. He turned and ran out, headed for the limousine.

"In that case," Mike said to Aunt Zel, "I suppose I'll have to talk to Greg about that opportunity you mentioned. After all, I promised."

"Michael, I've been thinking about it and I've decided it would be a mistake," Aunt Zel said. "A boy belongs with his family. He needs the companionship of—" She glanced at Peter and Bobby again. "—of persons with whom he has something in common."

"But—"

"No, no, don't try to change my mind," Aunt Zel said. She moved toward the hallway that led to the bedroom area. "I really have no time to discuss it now. I must be on my way. I have the whole country to cross this summer, you know."

"Yes, but—"

She was gone.

"What did you want to say, Dad?" Bobby asked.

"Nothing," Mike smiled. "Absolutely nothing. I always say 'Yes, but,' when I have nothing to say." He looked out the door and saw the five Watts boys emerging from the trailer, with their instruments and luggage. "Oh, no! Not in here!" he said, as they started toward the house. "Lie down in the doorway or something!" he said to Bobby and Peter. "Block that pass . . . hold that line . . . something!"

Mike ran from the foyer and into the recreation room.

"What's happening?" Carol asked. "We've been hearing crashes and— *What's happening?*"

"Everything! All at once!" Mike replied. "Roger's at the back door. The boys are at the front. Aunt Zel's taking her baseball and leaving. No, no, not her baseball— her king. Tut. Forget everything I've said. Just come and help Bobby and Peter block the front door."

Mike raced from the room.

Carol, Alice and Marcia dashed after him.

Just outside the recreation room, Mike stopped short to keep from colliding with Peter and Bobby, who, along with Cindy and Jan, had arrived to inform him that the Watts boys were already inside the house.

"Why didn't you lock the door!" Mike demanded.

"You didn't tell us to do that," Peter replied. "You said to lie down. That's what we did. But they just stepped over us."

"Maybe it's not too late," Mike said. "Maybe we can drive them out through the back. Where are they?"

"They went toward the kitchen," Bobby said.

"Mike," Carol said, "aren't you being a little hasty? What do you mean, drive them out? They're guests. Until Gladys and—"

"Roger is here!" Mike told her. "That's what I was saying. Roger is here. And Aunt Zel is leaving. Her pot is broken. King Tut. But not Greg. In the first place, I guess the lunch with the maharajah didn't go the way he expected it to. And in the second place, she took back her opportunity. Spring madness. Baseball. Understand?"

Carol was shaking her head. "No, I don't understand."

"I understand," Peter said. "All except that part about Greg. And about somebody named Roger."

"He's the burglar," Mike explained.

"Oh!" Carol said, brightening. "*Now*, I understand." She frowned. "All except the part about the baseball and spring madness."

"Why don't we all leave town for a week?" Alice suggested. "By the time we get back, maybe it will all have blown over—whatever it is."

"To the kitchen!" Mike said. "Roger!"

"Roger, Wilco and Out," Carol replied.

Mike ran toward the foyer.

The others raced after him. When they all reached there, Greg was just entering. He was having trouble getting past the luggage and instrument cases that the Watts boys had left in the entranceway.

"Clear a path through here!" Mike said. "I don't want any obstructions in the way. Aunt Zel and Ohoho and the babies will be going through here. And, if we're lucky, The Numbers Racket plus mama and papa!"

The boys began moving the Watts boys' belongings out of the doorway, and Mike, Carol, Alice and the girls proceeded to the kitchen. Reaching the kitchen entrance, they halted, piling up, and stared, partly in horror, partly in fascination.

Alma and Roger had squared off, one at each side of the kitchen table. The Watts boys had taken seats on the floor around the room, turning the kitchen into a theater-in-the-round. On the stove, a limp bicycle tire

was hanging over the edge of a large kettle. On the table, a number of small flower pots were resting in a pool of jello.

The Bradys' arrival went unnoticed by Alma and Roger. They were completely absorbed in a fiery discussion that seemed on the brink of going out of control.

"What do you want from me?" Roger demanded. "I'm giving you everything you asked for, but still you're not satisfied!"

"I don't want what I asked for!" Alma answered. "I want what I want!"

"All right!" Roger told her. "And, I'm telling you, I want you to have what you want. You want to get out of the music racket! Okay—we'll get! You want to settle down in a house in Rubeville and raise the boys to be computer programmers. Okay—we'll settle down! We'll plug the boys into a computer! It's what you want. It's what I'm telling you you can have! But you're not satisfied! What more do you want?"

"I don't want any of that!" Alma replied tearfully.

"But that's what you said you wanted."

"I keep telling you—I don't want what I said—I want what I want!" She pointed to the stove. "Do you think I want that?"

Roger looked a little puzzled. "Does it go with the house?" he asked.

"I don't mean *that* exactly," Alma replied. "I mean what it represents. Do you realize what it represents?"

"A bicycle tire?" Roger guessed.

"No. A whole bicycle!"

"How about that!" he replied, impressed. "How did

you get the whole thing into the kettle? And what happened to the rest of it? Did it melt down?"

"What I mean is," Alma went on, "it represents a whole bicycle that a boy has when he lives in a house. Did any of our boys ever come to us and ask us to repair his bicycle tire? No! And do you know why? Because we lived in hotels and we never had any bicycles!" She pointed to the puddle on the table. "Did jello ever do that to me before?" she asked.

"When did you ever make jello before?"

"Never! Again, that's exactly what I mean. When we wanted jello, we had room service send some up. Do you have any idea how much better that is than trying to make it yourself? Room service is experienced. It knows how to keep it from running out the hole in the bottom. I could *never* learn that. I don't even *want* to learn it. There's something . . . well, unnatural about being able to pour jello into a mold and not have it run out the hole in the bottom. *I'm just not that kind of woman!*"

"Are you trying to tell me—" Roger began.

"I'm trying to tell you that I want to go back to the old way of living," Alma broke in. "I like living in hotels and depending on room service. I like traveling from city to city to city, not being sure where I am half the time. Because here, I know exactly where I am and I don't like it. I'm no place."

"Now, wait a minute—" Roger said.

"And the boys!" Alma went on. "Think of the boys!" She gestured in a circle. "Look at them! Look at those faces!"

Roger looked. The boys stared back at him, droopy-eyed.

"They always look like that," Roger replied.

"Like that? So . . . so . . . so . . . so. . . ."

"As long as I can remember, they've looked like that," Roger said. "You've always been so busy with business, you haven't taken time to look at them. And that's why I think your first idea was the best idea. For the sake of the boys, we ought to get out of the rat race."

"What about us?" Alma demanded. "Are we supposed to sacrifice our whole lives to the children?"

"How do you—"

"Who wanted them to be musicians?" Alma demanded.

"You did."

"But why? Only because I knew they wanted it for themselves, that's why. I sacrificed my chance for a normal, happy life just for them. But do they appreciate it? No! Now, they want to bury me in some little burg like —like—" She turned toward the doorway. "Where am I?" she asked Mike.

"What town?" he replied. "You're—"

But she had lost interest in the answer. And you're just as bad as they are," she charged, continuing to address her husband. "As a matter of fact, you probably put them up to it. Oh, you're a selfish man, Roger Watts! You're only interested in what *you* want!"

"Oh no! No you don't!" Roger replied. "You walked out on me because I didn't want to settle down in a home. So I sat down with myself and really thought it out. And I realized that you were right—music is on the

way out, it has no future. The best thing for all of us is to get out of the music business and into the computer business. I'm sold. No, you are not going to un-sell me!"

"Could I say something?" Mike said.

"Who are you?" Roger asked. "I know you're not Harvey, my brother-in-law. He lives next door."

Mike introduced himself, then explained why Alma and the boys were in the Brady house.

"Yeah, I saw that note on the door," Roger nodded. "That's what brought me over here." He faced his wife again. "Now, this is the way it's going to be," he said. "We are getting out—"

"Don't you dare strike me!" Alma shouted.

Roger blinked at her. "Strike you? There's a table between us. I didn't even have my hands raised."

"I know what you were thinking!" she charged.

"Please . . . one minute," Mike said. "Would you just let me say *one* thing?"

Roger shrugged. "Why not? She won't let me talk. And I don't care to hear what she has to say."

"I think maybe it can be worked out so that both of you have your way," Mike said. "Now, first, Roger, let me say that I think you're wrong about music. Why do you think it has no future?"

Roger pointed to the boys. "Have they been playing while they've been here?"

"Well . . . yes. . . ."

"And you can still ask me why I think music has no future?"

"What was the first music?" Mike asked.

"The first? You mean, way, way back? Well. . . ." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then replied, "Probably some caveman banging on a log with a stick."

"Sort of a racket?"

"I guess you could say. . . ." Roger nodded. "Yeah, I see what you're getting at. That caveman's neighbor probably swore there was no future for music. But it's been around for quite a while. Okay . . . I guess maybe it does have a future. But that doesn't mean that we have to be part of it." He pointed to the boys. "They want a home!"

"They want a hotel!" Alma snapped.

"Home!"

"Hotel!"

"Why don't you ask them?" Mike suggested.

"What do they know about it?" Alma replied. "They're artists, they're not supposed to think."

"Besides, I know what's best for them," Roger said.

"Just for the novelty of it, why don't you ask them which they'd prefer—a hotel or a house?" Mike said.

Roger and Alma looked at the boys. The boys looked back at Roger and Alma.

Then Ein spoke. "Yeah, we're in favor of that," he said.

"Of which?" Roger asked. "A hotel or a house?"

"Both," Ein replied. "Or, to put it another way, neither. It's sort of six of one and six of the other. I mean, a hotel is okay. But then, so is a house. Yeah . . . I guess if we had to make a choice we'd take either one."

"See—they're on my side," Roger said.

"Your side!" Alma protested. "You heard what they said as well as I did. A hotel! They want a hotel!"

"House!"

"Hotel!"

"Hooooooooldit!" Mike broke in. Then, when there was silence, he said, "I think I have a solution for you." He looked at Roger. "You want a house—right?"

"Not only want. I insist on it."

Mike turned to Alma. "But you want to hit the road—is that correct?"

"That or nothing at all!"

"Then . . . get yourselves a house trailer," Mike said. "You'll have a house and you can still go on the road. You can take your house right along with you." He looked at the boys. "You've been living in a trailer," he said. "Does it satisfy you?"

"Oh, yeah, that's one of our three first choices," Two replied.

"You know . . ." Roger said, "it's not such a bad idea at that."

"Why, it's mahhhhhvelous idea!" Alma gushed. "It will be so easy to get away from the housework!"

"How?" Alice asked, interested.

"Why, when things get dusty, we can just unhitch the trailer and drive away," Alma explained. "Isn't that what everyone does?"

"Oh . . . sure . . . sure, sure, sure," Alice replied quickly. "You've seen those clusters of trailers along the highways, I suppose. They've all been abandoned. What else can you do with a dusty trailer?"

At that moment, from behind the Bradys, came Ohoho's voice. "Crear the way!" he insisted.

They turned.

"Got to get the babies flom the shrelves," Ohoho advised them, pointing into the kitchen.

"Give him room!" Mike said.

The Bradys got out of the doorway, then the Wattses evacuated the kitchen, allowing Ohoho to enter.

"Well, I'll get my family out of your house," Roger said to Mike. "I imagine you're pretty tired of having them around by now."

"Oh, no. It's been— Well, it's been—"

"—interesting," Carol said, helping him out.

"I left the car over in Madge's and Harvey's driveway," Roger said to Alma and the boys. "Get the bags and the instruments and pile in. We'll go to a hotel for the night."

"Trailer!" Alma insisted.

"All right," Roger sighed. "We'll see if we can find a trailer dealer who's open."

The Bradys followed the Wattses to the front of the house, where the boys began picking up the luggage and instrument cases they had left there earlier.

"Alma appreciates your hospitality," Roger Watts said to Mike and Carol. "And if you ever happen to be in the neighborhood of our trailer be sure and— But then, on second thought, there won't be room."

"Come on, Roger," Alma urged. "All the trailer dealers are liable to be sold out."

With Alma and Roger leading the way and the boys following in single file—Ein, Two, Tre, Cuatro and Cinq—the Wattses departed.

"There's one thing," Alma was saying to Roger. "How do we get it to Europe?"

"On a boat."

"Roger . . . do you think a yacht might be even better . . . instead of a trailer, I mean. . . ."

Roger's reply could not be heard.

"Crear the way!" Ohoho's voice commanded.

The Brady's stepped out of the entranceway, allowing him to pass with a supply of antiques from the kitchen shelves. He moved on toward the trailer. A few seconds later, Aunt Zel appeared. She was carrying a small suitcase.

"Let me—" Greg said.

"No, no!" Aunt Zel replied, backing away from him. "I have some of my babies in here."

"He's not dangerous," Mike told her, smiling.

"One never knows. . . ." Aunt Zel replied. "I discussed his illness with Ohoho, and he tells me that baseball fever can run on into the summer—it doesn't necessarily end when spring does." She made clucking noises. "For the babies' sake—" She went hurrying past Greg, then hustled on toward the trailer.

It was late evening when Aunt Zel and Ohoho departed. The Brady bunch stood outside the house waving until the limousine and trailer disappeared into the dim-

ness. Then, admittedly relieved, they ambled back toward the doorway.

"I hope she wasn't too disappointed in us," Carol said to Mike.

"No . . . not disappointed. Scared silly, perhaps, but—"

"Oh, no—do you really think so?" Carol said sadly.

Mike laughed. "No, I didn't mean that. She's probably a little shaken up by the experience. She isn't used to a family—except for her antiques. The thing is, we lead different kinds of lives. She'll think about it, then she'll realize, I'm sure, that we're not as terrible as we may have seemed to her."

"I hope so," Carol said. "You know . . . I sort of liked her. If I were going to pick somebody to be pinned down with in a hotel suite in Djakarta . . . well, after you and the children, she might come first."

"Shhhhh. . . ." Mike said. "She might hear you and take that as an apology and come back."

They entered the house and moved on toward the sounds that were coming from the kitchen. Alice was there. She was holding a limp bicycle tire, looking around helplessly, wondering what to do with it.

"I think the vulcanizing idea was best," Mike said. "She just didn't know how to vulcanize it. You don't boil it. You saute it in onions, I think."

"Now you know what you'll be having for dinner tomorrow night," Alice told him. She pitched the tire to Peter. "You can have it for your bike in the meantime," she said. "But be sure to have it back here by tomorrow evening—or go without dinner."

"Is Alice kidding?" Cindy asked.

"Think about it," Greg said to her. "Would we eat bicycle tire?"

"It smelled good," Cindy replied. "It smelled better than spinach."

"I don't know why people are always discriminating against spinach," Marcia said, troubled. "If people would just think about it—"

"A little *less* involved, please, dear," Carol said to her. "A protest march on behalf of spinach, I'm afraid, would be—"

She was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

"I'll get it," Mike said, starting toward the front of the house. But then he suddenly halted. "No . . . wait . . . The last time the dooorbell rang and I said that . . . we got Aunt Zel and then Alma Watts." He retreated. "I'm not going to open any more doors until I know who's on the other side. You know what we need? We need a periscope!"

"Why two?" Bobby asked.

"Not a pair of," Mike replied. "A peri. It's a sort of a telescope that's—"

"Mike, somebody has to answer the bell," Carol said. "If we don't, whoever it is will go—"

The bell rang again.

"—away," Mike said, without any confidence whatsoever in the statement.

"It's probably just . . . well, just a friend," Carol said, beginning to worry.

"But suppose it isn't," Greg said. "We have a lot of rel-

atives. It could be any of them. And what about our vacation. Are we on vacation or aren't we?"

"He's right," Alice said. "It could be any of them. In fact, the odds are that it's all of them, all in one package. There's an old saying: when it rains, it pours. You go in there and open that door and every relative you have in the whole universe will pour in through the opening."

"Peter," Mike said, "you sneak in there and peek out a window. *But don't let whoever it is see you!*"

"What'll I do after I peek?" Peter asked.

"Come back here and tell us who it is."

"What if I don't know who it is?"

"*Will you just go look!*" Mike said crossly.

Peter shrugged, then departed for the front of the house.

"He'll goof it up," Greg said. "He'll probably stick his head out the window. He'll stick his head out and say—"

"Don't give him ideas," Carol said.

"He can't hear me."

"He can. The only time he can't hear is when you want him to."

"Shhhh!" Mike said.

The doorbell rang again.

"Whoever-it-is can hear us talking," Mike said. "That's why he, she or it doesn't go away."

"How can he, she or it possibly hear us talk—"

Peter reappeared. "You won't like this," he told Mike and Carol.

Mike groaned. "Another relative! Which one?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? How do you know it's a relative, then?"

"I don't," Peter replied. "That's what I was going to tell you. I can't see who's at the door from the window."

Once more, the doorbell rang.

"Oh, boy!" Mike said glumly. "We're stuck. There's only one thing to do. I'll just have to—" He suddenly beamed. "Of course!" he said. "Why didn't I think of that before? There's more than one thing to do! We don't have to answer that door! We can take it on the lam!"

"What's that mean?" Peter asked.

"That's old-timey talk for cut out," Marcia explained.

"Mike, what are you talking about?" Carol asked.

"Let's do what we should have done in the first place," Mike said. "Carol . . . you and the children, throw some things in some suitcases. Alice, give this kitchen a quick swipe with a mop. And I'll get the car out of the garage and pull up to the back door. We can throw everything in, jump in ourselves, and we're off! We'll roar by that front door with our exhaust pipes snorting! Off, off and away!"

"You mean—"

"Grand Canyon, here we come!" Mike replied.

The doorbell sounded again.

Carol and the children dashed toward the bedroom area to start packing.

Alice dashed to the utility closet to get the mop.

"It won't be long now!" Mike said, moving toward the back door. "We'll be out on that turnpike—pulled off on a shoulder with a flat tire. That's the life!"

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